



## **You Are What You Eat by Alice of the Ashes**

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**Summary:** They say you are what you eat. So what does that make It?

## 1. Musings

A/N: Pennywise is a little OOC here, as It must be to be anything beyond a one-dimensional manifestation of evil, but I will try to remain as close to Its nature as I can. I have not read the novel. This is set in the 2017 film universe.

The Losers will eventually make an appearance, fear not. Although I have not yet decided how close I'll be sticking to the film canon.

Fair warning of violence (including against children), language, references to sexual abuse, and general Pennywise nastiness.

Praise and criticism are equally welcome.

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It had never had children, young, progeny, offspring. It understood the concept of children, of course. How could It lure the children of Derry into Its grasp, torment them with their worst fears, drive them mad with terror, manifest as their nightmares, if It didn't? The children's fears were simple and shortsighted, easy to physically represent and easy to prey upon. They feared trauma in their past, or fictional monsters, or common dangers. Seeing a loved one die, disease, spiders, abusive parents, bears, bullies, werewolves. The list was seemingly endless, and with every hunting spree It found a child with a fear It had not yet seen.

And yet their fears were always so... base. Encapsulated in their little world, their little lives, their little minds. None of them could comprehend true terror. The things It had seen in Its life among the endless cosmos, before It had ended up here, lurking beneath this tiny, boring town on this tiny planet (but boring the planet was not, oh no, It had sensed its potential millennia ago). None of them could comprehend the endless nothingness of the Abyss, of Death. It felt it yawning near every time It awoke, ready to claim It. It was glad It had found this planet with these simple children and their simple minds and their simple fears, where It could feed to Its content and stave off Obliteration for another few decades.

Adults were not as... plain. Their minds could grope closer in the

direction of actual horror. They knew, all of them knew in the back of their minds, that there was more out there than cancer and debt and endless war and missing children. Worse things. They didn't know *what*, but they could sense there was more. The stuff It was made of. And the stuff It was afraid of.

It had found, over the centuries, that it was the simultaneous simplicity and imagination of children that made them interesting. More interesting than the adults, better *prey* than the adults. *Tastier* than the adults. Pennywise, created for children, had become Its favorite form.

As It understood the concept of children, It also understood the concept of parenthood. Guardian, keeper, provider, shepherd. Humans found parenthood fulfilling; it saturated them with that odorous and repulsive emotion, *love*. Love was almost as loathsome as its cousin, *bravery*. Parents had thrown themselves at their deaths headfirst in attempts to save their children from It. They had scoured the town, the woods, the sewers for their missing spawn. They had moved away to avoid the memories, the ghosts of their lost sons and daughters. They had killed themselves in shame and sorrow. Their attachment to their children was truly remarkable. Something rare to see in all the expanse of the universe. Something, to Its vast but not exhaustive knowledge, unique to creatures on Earth and especially strong in humans.

It had also come to understand the concept of loneliness. Its solitude did not weigh on It like it would on a human, with their inferior minds. But It understood. Its world was the town of Derry and the sewer grid underneath it. For twenty-seven years or more at a stretch, It was alone with Its dreams and thoughts. It had been millennia since It had seen anything outside of the town, let alone outside of the planet. Millennia since It had seen anything approaching It in intelligence or power or scope. A mere drop in the ocean of time, but oh yes, It could *understand* how one could grow to be lonely.

For now, the city and the sewers and the entertainment from the children's fear was enough. But It had seen many things and lived in many universes across the macroverse. It knew that one day, It would need more, or It would go insane (more insane than It maybe already was). It would need to find more to do, more to amuse Itself with.

More purpose than feeding and sleeping. Perhaps that knowledge, in itself, was a sign of Its slipping sanity. Who would have guessed that such a superior being, existing since almost the creation of time itself, would feel the touch of madness?

In the next fifty-four years or so, maybe It would drag a brat down there and keep them alive for a day or two. Just to see what would happen, what the kid would do. Until It got bored. *Maybe*, if he kept the child alive long enough (if It could control Itself long enough), they would get so hungry that It could persuade them to share a meal with It. *That* would be funny.

Children, adults, offspring, parenthood, loneliness. It mused these things over as It crouched at the base of Its tower of junk and mementos – bikes, shoes, clothes, plastic little-girl jewelry, action figures, stuffed animals, rotting food –, under the corpses floating like clouds near the peak. It thought on these things as It shredded the creamy pale torso of an eight-year-old boy between Its needle teeth.

## 2. Alex

A/N: I decided to re-upload this chapter because I wasn't fully satisfied with it. There were a few small changes I wanted to make, and I realized that I had neglected to give this chapter any sense of time or place (that is intentional in the first chapter). I am sort of re-inventing Its history of killing here; the 2017 film doesn't go all that in-depth, neither does the TV special from the 1990, and I haven't read the book. With a lot of effort and Googling I could probably craft something that fits into the book canon, but this is more fun.

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*April 15th, 1935 – March 1st, 1936*

It was awoken by a violent attack that started as a mugging and escalated into rape and then murder. Before the woman's corpse, facedown in the shallow and filthy water flowing from the sewers, had cooled to environmental temperature, It had risen. It stretched languidly before Its underground tower of trophies, spidery talons clawing at the air, wide and needle-toothed grin splitting Its clown face. It drank in the woman's terror, which lingered along the bushes bordering the water where the deed had been done, as a stench would soon linger around her body. Her fear was stale and thin, an appetizer that only further sparked Its hunger.

It cast Its consciousness about the town, probing, observing, taking stock. There were almost a dozen children alive and thriving in Derry that had not yet been conceived when It was last awake. A blonde-haired, blue-eyed girl in her ninth year caught Its attention. Her fear drew It. She feared her abusive parents: their harsh words, the nightly beatings, the withheld meals ("money is thin" was the common excuse). It was famished and not in the mood to dally. It appeared before her while she waited alone for the bus, garbed in Its favorite form, the clown. Pennywise waved at her cheerfully from the bushes, then held out a cherry-red balloon. When she approached, smiling, and reached out for the white string Pennywise held between Its fingers, It grabbed her by her long golden braid and yanked her into the darkness under the leaves, emerging into the musty dimness of the abandoned house on 29 Neibolt Street. It allowed her enough

time to comprehend what happened and begin shrieking, fear flavoring her flesh, before It devoured her, swallowed her almost in one gulp. Only a single, worn, leather boot remained.

Hunger dulled, It was content now to take Its time, to savor Its meals and the game that came before. Although It preferred the fear and flesh of the young, It decided to pursue one of the men who had awoken It by defiling and killing the woman. The irony was funny to It. It appeared before the man as the murdered woman, half-coagulated blood oozing slowly from her mouth, from her arm, from between her legs, from the gash in her skull that made her brain stop telling her heart and lungs to function. It appeared before him as this woman, floral city dress torn and dirty, missing an Oxford pump, and It told him that he would be next, that she was coming for him. Months of this passed, nearly half a year, until the man was so worked into a frenzy that he was ready to hang himself from the tree by his favorite fishing spot. It tore him to pieces.

A dozen more children were leisurely tormented and consumed by It over the remaining months. As always, the town moved on at Its psychic urging, the majority of Derry's (Its) residents forgetting about the tragedies that had befallen them one after another. The discovery of the women's corpse, dumped like refuse. The missing children. The unidentifiable adult male remains. All newsworthy for a day or two, then forgotten. Except for the mother of the third child It had taken, who divorced her oddly apathetic husband, took up drinking, and moved to Virginia. Occasionally, there was a person or two who could somewhat resist Its influence.

It was sated. But something niggled at It. An uncharacteristic preoccupation. The same question that It had pondered years, decades before. What would it be like to bring a child down to Its lair? It had always concealed Itself from any humans who came to service the sewer. How would the brat react to the tower of belongings from long-dead children? The bodies floating high above like vultures riding heat waves?

It did not spend time studying and considering, as It usually did with Its prey. Instead, It found the closest unattended child, a four-year old boy playing with a toy train in a dirty, weedy sandbox despite the cloudy sky and chill weather, simply glad to be out of school. It

appeared before the boy as his mother. It saw the boy's name was Alexander. It ordered Alex to come inside and reached out to grasp Alex's wrist. Alex was a good boy, quick to obey. With a gust of wind and the blink of an eye, they were in the sewer.

For several long seconds, Alex looked around at the deep shadows, the grimy puddles, the high ceiling, the tower of junk. He did not seem to notice that the forms floating high above were bodies. Alex sniffled and began shivering. He scrubbed the back of one hand across his sweaty forehead, brushing dark hair back from hazel eyes without releasing his train, then glanced down at the gloved hand clamped around his. Alex's gaze traveled up Pennywise's frilled wrists, long arm, wide collar, and settled on Its face. It was not smiling, unsure of how the brat would react and already wondering if It had made a mistake. Its eyes were yellow, both of them focused on Alex with predatory alertness.

Alex held Its gaze for a long moment, shock fading to confusion, and began to cry. He yanked at Its grasp, and fell into a puddle when It released him. The train went careening across the cement floor. It felt Its mouth begin to water in response to the fear rolling off of Alex in growing waves. Aware that drooling made humans uncomfortable, It swallowed a gob of saliva with an audible gulp and knelt in front of the boy, who was still sitting and sobbing. His well-worn jeans were turning indigo as they soaked up the water he was sitting in, faded white cotton shirt turning translucent where it had been splashed. Through great force of will, It avoided ogling Alex's plump, pink, bare feet.

"Come now, there's no need for that. I'm not going to hurt you." As an afterthought, It changed Its eyes to a more charming periwinkle blue, let one roll to the side, and put on a bashful smile. "I'm Pennywise, the Dancing Clown. And this is my home."

Alex's cries increased in volume to near-shrieks. It held back a wince. Screams were only music when It wanted them.

"Would you like a balloon?" It reached behind Its back and brought Its arm forward with a small, red, balloon dog in Its fingers. This minor display of magic only served to terrify Alex further.

With an exasperated glare, Pennywise popped the balloon dog in Its fist and stood. Alex still remained where he had fallen, making no attempt to escape but screaming loud enough to wake the spirits that roamed these tunnels. His face was screwed into a red knot with the force of his cries, snot dribbled from his nose, saliva wet the corner of his mouth. It slipped out of Its clown form; the frills and boots and makeup melted away, insectoid limbs sprouted. Alex was shocked into silence, face falling slack, eyes blank. It grabbed Alex in a clawed, monstrous hand and set him upon a crate near the tower of junk, then shoved the train into his lap. Alex's terror was a high, sweet scent that filled Its nostrils. It left him down below Derry and withdrew to skulk about the Neibolt house, away from his smell and away from his screaming, should he start up again.

But Alex didn't start screaming again. Alex didn't do *anything*. He didn't move or speak. His hands remained in his lap, clutching the train. His breath came in little gasps. He stared, unseeing, into the shadows. It began to wonder if It had broken the child. Once Alex had been catatonic for nearly twelve hours, filling the sewers with the aroma of his mind-breaking, numbing terror, It gave up. The child was half-dead already, mind gone as it was. And the smell of his fear was sparking Its appetite.

It dispatched Alex with one clean bite that severed his head from his shoulders. A mercy killing more than anything.

As a finale to Its rampage, It *influenced* a lonesome and shunned fifteen-year-old boy to set his school on fire. With the students and teachers inside. Some escaped before being swallowed by the fire and smoke. But not all. Not most.

Sleep did not come easy to It; It did not slip into hibernation for a full week, and could not rest easy until tossing Alex's bloodstained little train into the woods on the outskirts of Derry.

### 3. Sylvan Scenes

A/N: I apologize for the odd title. I didn't expect this to be so long, almost twice as long as the previous chapter. It would have been even longer, but I split it into two parts.

I am not sure yet how I will handle the Losers and the film plotline, if I should put my own spin on it or skip quickly over it and pick up after the film's end. Open to suggestions on that.

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*August 20th, 1964 – February 20th, 1966*

This time it was a bully that moved It from Its slumber. A high-school bully – Thomas – cornered a middle school boy – Sam – on his walk home from school (alone, of course) and dragged him into the woods, crunching through sticks and dead leaves, passing under branches of red and orange and yellow, the boy's yells swallowed by the echoing forest. Thomas's mind had snapped some days before, quietly, below the surface, and with a knife he had stolen from his mother's cutlery drawer he did to Sam what he wished he could have done to the bullies that preyed on *him* when he was a small child, played a part in twisting him into the monster he had become. Sam's screams and pleads spread out into the woods, his terror and pain at the peak of his suffering rousing It as a working-class family man might be roused by the smell of coffee and a kiss from his loving wife. It giggled as It awoke, donning Pennywise's flame-orange hair and faded white frills before It was fully conscious to the mortal plane. Its giggles grew into laughter when It saw what had stirred It.

Bullies had always been a favorite of It.

It traveled to the secluded section of forest where Thomas stood over the corpse of the little boy, blood-slicked knife in hand, eyes wide, chest heaving. The hand holding the knife shook, It was pleased to see, with fear as well as adrenaline. Fear for the consequences of his actions, fear for himself and what he was capable of. Seeing Sam's crumpled, torn form, smeared with blood and dirt, had sobered Thomas, just a bit. It saw Thomas frantically thinking of ways he could conceal or dispose of the body, alibis he could craft if the

police questioned him. It decided that It could have some fun with Thomas.

It manifested before him as Pennywise (what else?) and waved at him from behind a tree, grin standing out as a ruby slash across his white face. An orange leaf fell from above and disappeared into his wild hair.

Thomas stared at Pennywise, eyes rolling like a spooked horse, breath still coming in harsh and deep gasps. He shivered as if he did not have a jacket and sweater protecting him from the cold. He lifted a hand to rub at his nose, raw and sensitive from snorting a line of his father's "secret" stash of cocaine that afternoon. He left a smear of blood across his upper lip; half an inch lower and he could have had a mouth that matched Pennywise's. It chuckled, a long string of saliva stretching down to wave in the wind.

Gulping loudly and adjusting his grip on the slippery knife, Thomas shouted, "Who the hell are you?"

"I'm your *friend*, Thomas," Pennywise said in Its friendliest voice, the forcibly high-pitched tone it used with small children.

"I don't know you."

"But you do. I'm the one who gave you the idea to cut little Sam *allll* to pieces."

Thomas made a choking sound and his eyes flicked back to Sam. "I've never seen you before."

Its smile grew by a few degrees. "No, but you've heard me. The voices that speak to you when you're on the edge of sleeping and waking. The whispering in crowded places, always just behind you, that no one else hears." Its voice rose and roughened with Its excitement, the pupils of Its yellow eyes elongating into slits. "The beautiful, *beautiful* carnage that plays out on the backs of your eyelids. The knowledge that you are something different. *Special*."

Thomas shuffled a bit closer, and he nodded as It finished. Finally, the voices and nightmares and desire to rip and tear all made sense.

He hadn't been going crazy. This thing had been helping him along, molding him into who he was meant to be.

Although It had not been consciously manipulating Thomas, he wasn't far off the mark. Its presence cast a shadow over the whole town, sowed seeds of malice and perversion even as It slept down in the sewer. But It would play with Thomas *now*, oh yes It would. Thomas knew nothing of true fear, true insanity, true bloodlust. It ran Its tongue over Its crimson lips, scenting the air like a snake, tasting the fear crackling off of Thomas like an electrical current. Thomas could be Its toy until he had exhausted his usefulness.

"We will be good friends, Thomas." Its grin widened, saliva running down Its chin and wetting Its dirty, frilled collar. "I can help you become what you were meant to be. You aren't like the rest, not like the others."

Thomas stumbled closer, knife at his side, lips parted and trembling.

"You and I will do some great things together." Its smile climbed up the sides of Its face, long fangs sprouting from Its gums. "Oh, yes." Its voice deepened to a growl. "We will have so, so much fun together."

Light danced behind Its teeth, giving Thomas just the barest glimpse of the light thrown off by Its deadlights. Thomas swayed to a stop, knife dropping to the forest floor with a dull thud. His eyes took on a mimicking, orange-white glow. Pennywise pressed Its lips together with a pleased hum. As Thomas stood, gape-mouthed and staring at the light blazing within his skull, It stepped over to Sam's corpse with an exaggerated and comical sneaking motion. It bent low, sniffed at Sam's matted hair and sneezed. Sam had been dead for over half an hour. It preferred Its meat fresh. *Screaming, twitching* fresh. But It was hungry. Famished.

Its claws rent flesh and Its jaws cracked bone. It ate like a starving man rescued from a desert.

Thomas blinked and the glow faded from his eyes. He turned to see the clown stooped over the child, blood painting Its gloves and the front of Its costume. The sound of splintering bones echoed through the forest like breaking branches. It tore Sam apart like a wild dog.

Satisfied, It stood, licked Its lips, Its fingers. "Drag the boy that way, toward the river. Cover his body –" a sudden cackle burst from Its mouth, "– what's left of it, and leave him for the animals to devour."

Thomas obeyed, seizing the bundle of Sam's shredded clothing and tattered limbs without so much as a grimace. He plodded away, leaving a trail of blood droplets, further smearing his own jacket and pants.

"Wait," It called after him.

Thomas stopped and looked over his shoulder.

"Before you go..." It reached behind Its back and produced a crimson balloon tied with white string, standing out against the bright sky like a large, ascending blood droplet, as if Sam's blood had risen from beneath Pennywise's feet, gathered together and floated into the sky. "Have a balloon."

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It wreaked havoc on Derry, with Thomas as Its weapon, Its conduit. It selected Its targets, stalked them, drove them nearly mad with fear, then It used Thomas to abduct them. Sometimes he grabbed them on the way to or from the bus stop, sometimes he snatched them from their bicycles when they rode past the woods or over the bridge on weekends, sometimes he snuck into their homes at night and took them from their beds. It would provide assistance as needed. It made witnesses forgetful if Thomas happened to be spotted in the same area a child went missing, rubbing a greasy smear across their memory. It told Thomas when it was safe to strike. It deepened the sleep of parents and older siblings so that they wouldn't hear Thomas lift a window or tread on the creaky floorboard. And, as always, It made Derry forget.

It ordered Thomas to bring the children he kidnapped down to the house on 29 Neibolt Street. There It would feast. If Thomas had performed particularly well, It would let him have a little fun with them, too. Several of the kids It drove catatonic with glimpses of Its deadlights, deep in Its throat, and sent them up to levitate around Its tower of junk. For later.

By December 23rd of 1965, It had stolen a dozen of Derry's spawn from right under their noses, using a single, insane human. And not a particularly strong or smart one at that. It had also had Thomas club a lone drunks and hunters over the head when the opportunity presented itself.

On Christmas Eve, It sent Thomas to sneak into a house and kidnap the two children there, a brother and a sister, seven and nine. They had finally fallen asleep despite their excitement for the morning and their fear of the bedroom shadows It had lurked in and whispered from for days. But the father had remained awake to eat and drink from the plate of cookies and glass of milk the children had left out, and It could not persuade the father to more than slightly nod off in his armchair. He awoke to see Thomas's form looming in the entryway, and made disappointingly quick work of him with the shotgun he kept over the fireplace. And that was the end of that little game. By New Year's, Derry had forgotten that a home intruder's face had been turned to hamburger meat on Christmas Eve, and that he had been clutching a rope and a knife crusted with old blood.

It consoled Itself with the fact that Thomas had been on the brink of insanity anyway, and close to being unable to blend in with the citizenry and at least pretend to live a normal teenage life – his parents had begun to worry about his plummeting grades and outbursts of temper and ill-timed laughter.

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It pouted beneath Derry for a week. Then It began doing some legwork (so to speak). It watched the siblings that had escaped Thomas's grasp. They had been keeping close together since It had started appearing to them, seeking safety in each other's company. Fortunately, they did not share a bedroom. In the middle of the night, It mimicked the sister's voice, calling her little brother to the dark bathroom with screams only he could hear. It slithered up the bathtub drain and whisked him away to Its lair, then returned moments later to burst from the sister's closet and snatch her away as well. Her cries of alarm attracted her parents, but seconds too late.

A month later, It took seventeen year old Jonathan, who had gone into the woods on a Friday evening to meet a girl from his class (who It knew was not coming). It manifested as a giant, monstrous version

of the Doberman that had attacked him as a child, poorly cropped ears and all, and chased him around trees and through a freezing cold stream. It let out giggling snarls and barks as It closed the distance and let John pull away, again and again. When It finally closed the distance and tackled John to the ground, his last thought was that the dog had changed from when he had last caught It in his flashlight beam: Its lips and nose red, Its mouth lined with rows of shark-like teeth, Its eyes piercingly yellow and slitted and darting around independently, a bright orange mane sprouting from Its head, insectoid limbs dangling from Its underbelly.

Sometimes the fear was sweeter that way, when they never had even the vaguest idea of what It was or what It wanted.

After John had been reduced to scraps of bloodied clothing and a sole shoe, It could still sense fear, smell it on the snappy late-February air. The fear was stale, old, no more than a residual aura, and It knew what was giving it off even as It padded down a slope on plate-sized paws and nosed around in the deep snow accumulated there. It swept the snow and underlying decomposing leaves aside, then dug through nearly a foot of dirt moved downslope by time and rain.

It stared down at the train, grey paint chipped away by unknown abrasives, patched with moss. The old fear wafting off the toy slipped between Its parted teeth and tickled Its tongue. It could almost see where Alex's sweaty hands had gripped the train as he sat catatonic in the sewer, leaving invisible imprints like a heat signature. For a long moment, It stared at the train, unblinking and unmoving, as still as a wax figure. Then It gave a slow blink and Its canine brow furrowed in a glare. Its fur sloughed off and revealed carapace-like skin and Its paws melted into crabish legs. Shaking with rage, It bent and directed a buzzy screech at the train, then disappeared with a loud bang that kicked up snow and rattled the bare limbs above.

## 4. Susan

A/N: Turned out longer than expected (again). Next chapter should be coming sometime in the next week since I have an idea of where it will go, but I make no promises. ;) Georgie and the Losers will be making an appearance, but I am not sure yet how I should approach the film canon. I am open to suggestions.

As always, reviews greatly appreciated and treasured.

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*March 3rd, 1966 – March 7th, 1966*

For over a week It stayed underground, writhing and pacing, constricting and expanding, vacillating between frothing rage and quiet contemplation.

It selected Its target more carefully this time. Perhaps a child a little older than Alex would better be able to comprehend that It didn't intend to eat them (*not at first*). But too old, and they would be too wise; no amount of balloons or popcorn or other parlor tricks would convince them that a shapeshifting clown in a sewer was anything but bad news, bears.

It remained below Derry and cast Its mind about the town, looking for a child starved of attention, one that would be open to the prospect of meeting something that looked like it could be a friend. Absent or abusive parents, bullies at school, physical or mental disabilities. It was good at that, identifying people's weaknesses and insecurities. It had lots of practice.

A twelve-year-old girl that was a handy combination of several desirable qualities caught Its eye. Her name was Susan. She lived just a few blocks from the school, with a father who didn't bother to hide his affairs and a mother who drank until she screamed and slammed doors. Susan had been cut by the shard from a broken vase during one of her mother's tantrums, and was left with a pink scar slashing across her forehead and intersecting with one eyebrow. It knew that when she began to blossom into a teenager, she would try to conceal the scar with bangs. It knew it wouldn't work. She had a touch of

something different, something that teachers and doctors at a later time might have called mild autism or PTSD or micro-seizures, and prescribed treatment and medication for. Her parents just said she was on a different wavelength, and a little shy.

Rumors about Susan's parents floated around the school, and she was teased for her scar. She spoke to few classmates and had no real friends. The other children found her repulsive and off-putting. It could relate, although It relished being regarded with fear and distrust.

It whispered to her from inside sink pipes: in the kitchen, in her bathroom, in the school bathroom. Its voice echoed quietly from the storm drains as she walked to and from school, louder if it had recently rained. The smells and sounds of the circus wafted from the gap of her not-quite-closed closet door and from the darkness under her bed as she drifted between sleeping and waking, dissolving when her eyes snapped fully open.

As she slept, It filled her mind with dreams where she skipped over the grass under red and white-striped tents, cotton candy in hand, the only circus-goer. Lions jumped through flaming hoops, elephants balanced on giant balls, a clown with flaming hair and a buck-toothed smile juggled cherry-red balls. The clown's eyes were blue as glacial ice and pointed in opposite directions, like a teddy bear with a loose button eye. She laughed and clapped as the performers cycled across the stage, the clown always present; if he wasn't on the stage, he was off to the side, one eye on her and one on the performers. Often, she smiled at him, and his permanent grin would widen. She felt safe enclosed in the red and white tent, protected from the darkness and the night's chill, away from her parents and peers. Just her and the clown.

She would wake with the mingled longing and disquiet of a dream that was sweet to experience but disturbing in hindsight. Without the spectacle of the circus to distract her, she pondered the clown's lopsided eyes and saliva-dampened collar and constant staring. Susan thought that there was something off about the clown, something dangerous. Maybe this was why her parents had warned her not to talk to strangers.

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A boy from Susan's class went missing a few days after she began having dreams about the circus. Mrs. Smoak waited until everyone was in their seats before asking for quiet and announcing that Johnny hadn't been seen since leaving school the previous day. Nobody but Susan appeared to smell popcorn, hear the chatter and laughter of a crowd, or see the red balloon floating over Johnny's vacant desk. Susan wondered if this was what going crazy was like.

She had the circus dream again. This time, she shuffled slowly to a seat and watched the show without smiling or cheering. The clown picked up on her mood immediately, and left his post next to the stage to approach her. His mouth was downturned in a frown, almost a scowl. The closer he got, the more she realized how large he was. He was far taller than her dad, and as long-limbed and fluid as a scarecrow.

He stood over her, frowning, blue eyes almost glowing. Susan gulped. After several long seconds of statue-stillness, his face broke into the familiar smile. He crossed his arms and tucked his hands into his armpits with a jingle of bells, bending over. Susan shrank back into the metal bench.

For the first time, he spoke to her. "*What'ssss* troubling you?"

His – *Its* voice was oddly-pitched, deep but attempting to sound high and cheerful. Like a scary man trying to sound nice. Like a monster trying to sound human. Humans didn't have such large heads, didn't drool when they watched children, and didn't sound like *that*. Susan bit back a whine.

Seeing the tears brimming in her eyes, the clown frowned again. This time it was an exaggerated pout; even his wild hair drooped. "*What'ssss* wrong? Did I do something?"

Susan felt a prickle of guilt. She didn't *know* he had done anything to Johnny. It was just a feeling. Something about the clown gave her the creeps. But... It hadn't scared her before Johnny went missing. Maybe she was just being what her dad called "paranoid." The clown had been nothing but nice to her.

The clown still watched her, red lips pulled toward *Its* chin, eyes

watering. It gave an exaggerated sniff. Her guilt jabbed her again.

Her words came out as a nervous whisper. "I was... worried." Its hair rose at her words. The frown smoothed and Its chin dipped as It regarded her from under Its brows. Serious, solemn. She swallowed, mouth suddenly dry. "A boy in my class went missing, and... and I..." She felt ridiculous. What did she think? That the clown had kidnapped him? Would the false accusation make It angry, after all the effort It had put into a circus just for her?

"Annnnd?" Were Its eyes turning yellow?

"And I was afraid..." Did It lick Its lips because she said 'afraid,' or was that just a coincidence? "I was afraid you had taken him." She finished the sentence in a rush. Subconsciously, she held her breath as she watched the clown.

Its face went uncomfortably still again, like whatever life was in It had fled, leaving the body behind, frozen in place. Susan realized the circus had frozen too; a bear remained balanced on one leg atop a stool, ball balanced on his nose; the fabric of the tent ceased rustling; the music's absence left a silence with a physical weight. She chewed her lip to keep it from trembling.

With a blink, the clown returned to life. It smiled Its goofy smile down at her. Its lazy eye stared somewhere off to her right. "I did take him. But not in the way you think. He wanted a little vacation, so I brought him down to the circus."

"I don't see him here."

The clown did not seem annoyed by her challenge. "Everyone has their own circus."

"Really?!" Susan's eyebrows rose, wrinkling the scar, and her mouth gaped. "How many circuses do you have?"

It appeared to think, lazy eye corkscrewing slowly. "Oh.... Dozens. Maybe hundreds. I lose count."

"That's incredible!" Susan sat up, mind whirling as she imagined all the circuses that must be running at this very moment. Did they all

look like hers, white and red? Did the clown visit them all? The clown was still smiling at her. It was beginning to drool. She wanted to mention it, but was too embarrassed. Maybe It was retarded, like her dad's cousin. It occurred to her that she should apologize to this kind... thing. Friendly It may be, but a normal clown it was not.

"Are you mad?" She cringed. It was the sort of awful apology her mom would have given her a pinch over.

"*Mad?*" The clown's bells jungled as It gave Itself a little shake, like a wet dog. "Whatever for?"

"I thought I might have hurt your feelings."

The clown giggled. "No. Suspicion is *wise*."

"What's your name?"

"Pennywise. And you are Susan."

"How do you know my name?"

"I know *lots* of *thingssss*." The lazy eye gave a twitch.

Her mother's voice came to her, from far away. "Susan! Wake up!"

Susan puckered her lips. This was a dream. Dreams weren't real, and didn't have feelings. Dreams didn't take kids away to the circus. She had been silly to worry about an imaginary clown's feelings.

"This is silly."

"What's silly?"

Susan flinched. She hadn't meant to speak out loud. But there was no going back now. "I can't hurt your feelings, because you're not real."

Pennywise's face darkened, and both eyes focused on her face with predatory intensity. It nearly glared at her. "Oh?"

"Yeah. You're a dream." There was no reason to be afraid of angry dreams.

"Susan!"

Pennywise leaned closer, raised a dirty, gloved finger, and tapped her nose harshly.

Susan jerked awake. Her limbs were tangled in her bedsheets, and her pillow had fallen to the floor. Her mother's heels clacked in the hallway. The door swung open and her mother stood there, clothes, hair, and makeup done, trying to fasten an earring to her lobe.

"Susan, come on. You'll be late."

Her mother gave no sign that she saw the bright red balloon tied to the bedpost, nor did she inquire about the popcorn scattered over the floor, a piece of which had been crushed under one of her modest black pumps.

## 5. Grooming

A/N: I'll be changing the title from Mortal Thoughts to You Are What You Eat. The original title wasn't too bad when this was just a one-shot, but it doesn't fit so well with the work as a whole. So keep an eye out for that in the next few days.

Reviews make me blush.

---

*March 10, 1966 – March 11, 1966*

It gave Itself some time and space to calm down. It feared that if It saw Susan, It would lose Its temper. And that wouldn't end well for her, no sir, not at all.

Stupid, insolent brat. To dare suggest that It was a mere figment of her imagination. As if she could even comprehend Its nature, as if something as simple as a child's mind could contain and limit It.

It attacked a man out for a morning jog and tore him apart inside the covered bridge over the river, leaving a scene of senseless gore. It didn't even eat him.

It seethed down in the sewer water.

But It needed to be reasonable. Susan was not *entirely* at fault for believing It wasn't real. After all, It had only appeared to her in dreams. She had yet to see It in the waking world, standing before her as real as the nose on her face. Perhaps she couldn't be blamed for her offense. It had to be logical.

---

It visited Susan's room close to eleven in the evening. Her mother was sitting in front of the television and on her way to drinking herself into a stupor. Her father was parked on a dirt road somewhere, in the arms of another woman. It crawled out of the shadows in her closet, over to her bed, scuttling like a crab.

"Pssst. Wake up."

Susan groaned and rolled over.

"*Suuuuuuusan. Susan. Wake uuuuup.*" It popped the *p* loudly, startling her.

She rubbed her eyes with the back of one hand, brushing her blonde hair back from her face. Her lids opened, and she looked to her left to see that her bedroom door was closed.

"Down here."

She looked to her right, and saw the clown crouching by her bed.

"This is a dream," she mumbled.

Pennywise's eyes flashed yellow, just for a second. Its smile widened. "I'm no dream, *honey*."

"But --" Susan was cut off by a yawn. "You can't be real."

"I'm as real as anything. You saw the presents I left for you last time, didn't you?"

"It all disappeared when I went to the bathroom."

It had been angry, distracted, and It hadn't maintained the illusion. Its mistake.

"I think," she said forlornly, "that I'm going crazy."

It held back a laugh. Human minds were as thin and fragile as wet paper; even the barest glimpse of what lay beyond their tiny reality was beyond them. "I assure you, you aren't."

Susan propped her head on her hand and watched Pennywise for a long moment. "Did I upset you?"

She still thought It wasn't real. She thought she was sleeping. It grit Its teeth. Patience.

"You stayed away for a while."

"I had some things to take care of. In the circus."

"Like feeding the tigers?"

"Yes, like that."

"They eat meat."

"Yes. Warm, raw meat. Bloody meat. They prefer the flesh of younger animals." It swallowed a gob of saliva. The subject was spurring Its appetite.

Susan laid down and closed her eyes.

It giggled and shook Its bells. "I have an idea. I'll show you that I'm real."

She sat back up. With deft fingers, It plucked her old teddy bear from where it had rested under her bed for the past year. It stood and crossed her room in three large strides. "This little guy will be right here when you wake up." Pennywise reached up and perched the bear on top of her armoire, with a flourish, where she couldn't possibly get to it on her own, then returned to crouch by her bedside. "If you believe I'm real, meet me after school tomorrow. I'll be waiting on the playground after the other children go home."

She hesitated, and It read her mind.

"Your daddy won't be home yet, and your mommy won't notice. I'll bring popcorn." It pinched her nose. "As real as the nose on your face. I'll be waiting." With a parting wave, It slunk into the shadows in the back of her closet.

It could have taken her away right then, snatched her from her bed, but It was curious.

---

Susan was clever about meeting Pennywise. She feigned walking home, then doubled back once the bus had passed her. She didn't want any teachers or kids asking questions. She circled around the school building, tossed her backpack over the short chain link fence enclosing the playground, then climbed over. A piece of the twisted wire caught her shin. It stung and oozed blood, but wasn't deep. Already beginning to feel a little foolish, Susan scooped up her

backpack, dampened from the thin layer of snow on the ground, and surveyed the playground.

The swings creaked in the chilly breeze. The wind whistled through the S-shaped tunnel. A bird hopped around near the snow drift against the far fence. There wasn't a soul in sight.

Empty. She shouldn't be surprised.

With a heavy sigh, she turned to leave.

"Going so soon?"

Susan whipped around. "Where are you?"

"In here..." Its voice came from the tunnel. It had an affinity for tunnels.

Susan knelt near the opening and peered inside. It was unnaturally dark within; *some* sunlight always made it through. Two blue eyes glowed in the blackness. Then the white face appeared, and the crimson smile. No other part of Pennywise was visible. The head floated, disembodied. She smelled popcorn.

"Was the teddy bear still up there when you woke up?"

"Yes."

It chuckled. One eye strayed to her red-smeared shin. "Did you hurt yourself?"

"It's just a scratch."

A long line of saliva stretched from Its bottom lip, then fell to the tunnel floor with a *pat*. The smile faded.

"You said you'd bring popcorn."

Pennywise cleared Its throat and forced the smile back into place. "It's back here, in the circus."

"The circus is in *there*?"

"The circus is anywhere I *want* it to be. Would you like to come see it?"

"I don't know..." Susan glanced over her shoulder.

"It's *lonely* down here." It let Its hair fall flat and summoned tears to Its bright eyes. It added a sniffle for good measure.

Susan chewed her lip and clapped her mitten hands together. It sensed the emotions warring inside her. Guilt, fear of one of her mother's tantrums, discomfort (she still found It off-putting), pity. The duties of kindness and the promise of friendship won out. "Okay... but only for a little bit. I have to be home before dinner."

A grin lit Pennywise's face. "Oh, don't you worry about that."

She ducked her head and began to crawl into the tunnel. It had what it wanted. Excitement tightened Its pupils to slits, made Its irises glow yellow. Its grin nearly split Its face in two.

"Let me give you a hand," It growled. Its clawed fingers closed around the back of Susan's neck, yanking her into the darkness. Her surprised yelp was abruptly cut off. Pennywise extended Its arm again and snagged the strap of Susan's backpack, dragging it into the tunnel after them.

## 6. The Circus

A/N: \*Looks back at promise to update soon in last chapter\*  
AHAHAHAHAHAHAH

This was a lot of fun to write. Enjoy.

Reviews make my day.

---

*March 11th, 1966 – March 12th, 1966*

It was cold and dark. Not the same cold Susan had felt on the playground, cold from the wind and snow. This was a deeper, bone-aching cold, the cold of a place that had not seen the sun in years. She could see that she was in some sort of large, high-ceilinged cavern. What looked to be a tower stretched toward the top of the cavern, from where what little light there was filtered in. There were objects moving near the top of the tower, but she couldn't tell what they were. She heard water dripping. It stunk. Susan shuddered and wrapped her arms around herself.

"Hello? Pennywise?" Her voice echoed back at her.

She had made a mistake. Perhaps a big one.

Slowly, cautiously, she began to shuffle forward, scuffing her boots along the icy ground, feeling the way so that she wouldn't trip. Her toe bumped against her backpack. Her mom would have her hide if she lost it. Susan bent, scooped her backpack off the ground, and slung it over her shoulder. She took another few steps. "Pennywise?" No answer but her own voice. She ground her teeth together to hold back the urge to begin screaming for help. She didn't know where she was, or what else could be down here.

A loud thud came from the tower ahead of her. Susan flinched so violently that she nearly bit her tongue. A massive door in the tower had fallen open, revealing a stage illuminated by smoky orange and red lighting.

A mechanical voice sputtered, "Step right up!"

Susan did not want to approach the stage, not at all. She whispered, "Pennywise? Where are you?"

"I'm right *here*." The clown stepped out onto the stage with one long stride. "Shall we begin the show?"

At least she wasn't alone. Susan risked moving closer to the stage. "Where are we? What happened?"

"Oh, I almost forgot," It giggled and shook Itself like a dog, pompoms quivering and bells jingling. It had not forgotten; Susan's fear and confusion had amused It.

It snapped Its fingers, and Susan felt that she might vomit.

A billowing striped tent rose high above her, so high she almost couldn't see the top. The smell of popcorn and caramel and cotton candy and hot dogs and hay drifted on a gentle breeze. She spun around in a slow circle, mouth open, eyes wide and reflecting back the oranges and reds and whites of the circus. The same tent It had always conjured for her, complete with trained animals and contorting gymnasts and merry music. As always, she was the only patron.

"I told you there was a circus down here."

Susan spun to see Pennywise standing behind her. Its smile was goofy, friendly, but there was a glint to Its eyes she wasn't sure she liked, and that she realized had always been there.

"Where are we? How did we get here?"

It adopted a playful, patronizing tone. "We're in the circus, of course." It punctuated Its statement with a chuckle.

"We weren't there a second ago."

"I forgot to bring the circus along for a moment. My mistake."

But Susan was sharp. She wasn't satisfied. "Where's the circus? You

said it was wherever you wanted it to be. So where is it now?"

Its smile faded just a shade. "Your playground. In the tunnel. Remember?"

Susan decided not to pursue the issue. It didn't seem to like that train of questioning. "How come we can stand up here?"

Bending close, It took on a conspiratorial whisper. "I can do *lots* of things." Especially since Susan was still just the tiniest bit uncomfortable, the tiniest bit afraid. It siphoned off that fear, fed on it, spun it into the lights and sounds and smells of the circus. And tried not to fixate on it too much.

Susan remembered the popcorn and balloons left in her bedroom, the voices coming from the sink at school and the bathtub at home, the fact that Pennywise had hidden an entire circus in her playground tunnel, and calmed. It clearly had some sort of magic powers. Maybe It had just made a small mistake and taken them somewhere else at first.

"And we will have *lots* of fun together." It clapped Its hands on Its knees. "What do you want to do?"

"Well... I would like some cotton candy, but I don't want to ruin my dinner –"

"Ruined dinners don't matter down here." Its blue eyes flashed. "In fact, I think I see some. Right here..." It snapped Its fingers by Susan's ear and brought Its hand back into view, holding a stick wound around with grey-ish pink cotton candy.

Susan gasped, clapping a hand over her smiling mouth. "How did you do that?!" She plucked the stick from Pennywise, carefully not touching Its fingers.

It smelled her fear, sensed it take a slight uptick deep in her subconscious brain. Susan was sharp. She knew "magic" wasn't normal. She detected something off about the clown, something deeply wrong. And she knew that anything that could make cotton candy materialize or teleport a circus around was powerful enough to

be very dangerous.

But for now, excitement overrode fear and doubt. Perhaps not so sharp. It swallowed the laugh threatening to crawl up Its throat, and chewed on Its bottom lip to keep Its teeth from sprouting into deep-sea-creature fangs.

Susan frowned at him, cotton candy frozen midway to her lips. "Are you ok?"

Its eyes had gone yellow and red-rimmed. It blew through Its ruby lips like a horse and shook Its head. When It smiled at her, Its eyes were back to innocent baby blue. "*Jusssst fineeee.*"

Wrinkling her nose, Susan inspected the little cloud of cotton candy. "Are you sure this is safe to eat? How long have you been... keeping it?"

"It's fine."

"Hm."

"Don't you trust me?"

"I'm not sure yet."

It couldn't control Its laughter that time. Its whooping cackles echoed around the high tent, made It bend double, made tears run from Its rolled-back eyes and spittle fleck Its chin. Its fit ended with a high-pitched giggle and a pig-like snort.

Susan stumbled back, brow furrowed. "What's funny?"

"Well." It straightened, wiping at Its face with the back of one hand. "You, my dear."

"Why? What did I do?"

"Oh... it would take too long to explain." It rolled one eye toward her forgotten stick of cotton candy. "Do you mind?" With a quick, birdlike motion, It pinched off a wad of candy and shoved it into Its mouth. It tasted like nothing to Pennywise, of course. Sawdust, maybe. But It

rolled Its eyes with exaggerated glee and ran an obscene tongue along Its lips. It could feel the *thump thump thump* of Susan's nervously pattering heart. "*Delicioussss.*"

Susan frowned at It.

"What's wrong, Susie? I thought you wanted cotton candy."

"I do..."

"Well, don't be rude. Try it."

She took a tiny, cautious nibble. It was indeed delicious, some of the best cotton candy she had ever tasted. "It's good. Thank you." She offered It a small smile.

"Glad you like it."

"Are you the only clown here?"

"Yes. There's no one else quite like me in the whole, wide world."

"Do you get lonely?"

Its eyes drifted in different directions. "No."

"Everyone gets lonely sometimes."

"Not *me*," It tittered.

Susan took a large bite, filing 'loneliness' under subjects Pennywise didn't like to talk about. "Is Johnny down here?"

The missing boy from her class. Its eyes refocused on her face. "He's *somewhere* around here."

"Can we go see him?"

"Fraid not. He's sleeping."

"How do you know?"

"I *jussssst* know."

Her fear gave a little spike again. Susan took another bite of cotton candy, making an attempt to appear nonchalant. But she couldn't fool It. "What do you do for fun?"

"For fun? Well, I like to bring kids to the *circus*. Kids that don't have many friends, or just... need a vacation."

Something about that seemed fishy to Susan. "It's very nice down here, but I think it's time I started heading back."

"Going so soon?"

She tucked a tendril of blond hair behind her ear. "My mom's going to notice I'm gone, and –"

Its face went somber. "No, she won't."

The hurt was evident across Susan's face.

"And your daddy won't, either. He's too busy spending time with someone else who's not your mommy."

"That's a mean thing to say," Susan whispered.

"It's true."

Susan looked down and twirled the cotton candy stick in her fingers. A silence stretched out, during which It listened to the pattering of water in the maze of the sewer and she listened to the music and shouting of the performers. She sniffled, rubbing the tears from her eyes with the heel of her free hand.

"You wish your mommy wouldn't drink so much. And you wish your daddy spent more time at home. Isn't that right?"

Susan took a shuddering inhale and nodded.

It pretended to think. "I know a way we could teach them a lesson."

"What do you mean?"

"Stay here with me for a while. Make them worry about you, just a

bit. *Then* they'll pay attention to you. Once they know what they're *missssing*."

"I don't want them to get too worried –"

"Just a *little bit*."

"Well... ok."

Pennywise's gave a wide, drooley grin. It restrained Its excitement with some difficulty; Its eyes flickered toward yellow, shark's teeth vibrated in the swirling recesses of Its skull. Such an interesting, funny thing, the trusting nature of children. Even sharp Susan could be easily convinced to spend the night in the sewer cistern by some candy and pretty illusions.

"I'll be right back."

With a *pop*, the clown was gone. It returned mere seconds later, arms loaded with a pillow and blanket from Susan's bed, and, thoughtfully, a pair of pajamas.

Susan laughed. "It will be like a sleepover!"

It held back a gag. Disgusting.

It did what It did best, reflecting her childish excitement back at her. "Yessss, just like a sleepover. A sleepover in the circus."

Susan stuffed herself with candies and popcorn and tangerines that It conjured for her at her request. Out of thin air It spun balloon figures; bouquets of rich orange, butter yellow, greyish white, and blood red flowers; little white mice with ruby eyes; fluffy cloud kittens with baby blues. It snapped Its fingers and created a merry-go-round up on the stage, then transformed into a horse on the machine, complete with flame-orange mane, pompom-adorned bridle, and red lips. Her wonder over such simple parlor tricks was amusing to watch, and her undercurrent of nervousness kept It from growing bored. It helped that It manifested some of Its conjurations with loud, startling cracks that made her jump. Not all of them, and in a random pattern, so she couldn't anticipate it.

But It noticed something. Susan's fear of her parent's anger, her possibly impending punishment, It Itself, was fading. And that could be a problem.

When Susan began to struggle to keep her eyes open, It quieted the sounds of the circus to a muted murmur and dimmed the string lights to a soft glow. Pennywise politely turned Its back while Susan changed. She bunched up some of the hay strewn on the ground, settled her head on her pillow, and threw her blanket over herself.

"Aren't you going to get ready for bed?"

"I don't sleep."

"Oh."

She didn't want to be alone. While It would have liked to slip away and siphon off her fear, that wouldn't serve Its little experiment. "I'll stay next to you."

"Ok. Good."

It squatted next to Susan, hands resting on Its knees, electric blue eyes boring into her form.

"Can you not stare at me like that?"

It laid down parallel to her, arms and legs straight, staring up at the distant top of the tent.

"Goodnight," Susan whispered.

"Goodnight, *Susie*."

It didn't take long for her breathing to slow and deepen. She had had a long day. Pennywise let the circus illusion fade away and retreated to the shadows under Its junk tower. Susan's bed of hay remained. Its yellow eyes watched her from the darkness, the glinting gaze of a stalking predator. It let out a wheezing, clicking chuckle through Its insectoid mandibles. If that damned turtle could see It now.

In the early hours of the morning, the eyes winked out as It ascended

into Derry.

It was hungry.

## 7. Sharp

A/N: This hurts me more than it hurts you.

Reviews pay my bills.

---

*March 12th, 1966 – March 13th, 1966*

It crouched upon the bed and licked blood from Its chitinous fingers. The toddler had been small, but it would be enough to stave off Its appetite for a little while. His parents would awaken to find his bedsheets bloodied and their child missing, inexplicably. No windows open, no locks broken. Just gone. It sensed Susan waking up as It crunched bone between Its teeth; she was accustomed to rising early for school, and the chill of the sewers had her restless before the sun was up. It brought the circus back before she became fully conscious.

When It returned, she was sitting up in her bed of hay, blonde hair a rat's nest around her head and blue eyes blinking sleepily.

"Where were you?"

"Out and about."

"I should probably be getting home."

"Aren't you hungry?"

"Yeah, I guess."

"What would you like?"

"Do you have pancakes?"

"Susie." Pennywise cocked Its head at her. "I can have *anything*."

A child-sized table and chair grew from the dirt floor of the circus grounds. On top of the table sat a plate of syrup-drenched pancakes, a fork, and a cup of milk. It knew she didn't like orange juice.

"Thanks." Susan plopped into the chair and yawned widely. "Are my parents worried?"

Behind her back, Its painted face stretched into a grotesque, sharp-toothed grin. "They haven't noticed you're missing yet."

Susan paused, fork spearing a soggy chunk of pancake. "Really?" Rather than appearing hurt, her brow furrowed suspiciously. "Mommy always gets me up for school. She even notices if I sleep in for five minutes."

"I don't know what you want me to *tell* ya, kid. Maybe they just need a little more time to fully *appreciate* how important you are to them."

Susan turned to frown at It. Its baby blues rolled in different directions, Its buck teeth worked at Its bottom lip. The picture of innocence.

"Why don't you stay the day? Consider it like a snow day."

"Well..."

"*Please?*" It pursed Its lips into a pout. "I have ring toss. And balloon burst. And sand art."

Susan beamed, glad to be wanted, glad to have her company desired. Its offers of games to play was secondary. The fact that she had made it through the night unscathed allayed some of her residual worries about Pennywise. "Ok, I'll stay!"

---

While Susan was absorbed in tossing ping pong balls at a cluster of fish bowls with cherry-red fish of indeterminate species inside, It snuck away. It stepped out of an alley next to Derry's corner drugstore in another of Its common forms, the human Robert Gray. Next to Pennywise, Gray was Its favorite.

Gray adjusted the lapels of Its conservative, charcoal-grey suit and took a cigar from Its breast pocket. Lighting the cigar with a snap of Its fingers, It started down the sidewalk, toward Susan's home, polished black dress shoes clicking on the cement. It was close to noon, the party should be in full swing.

---

Susan's mother (Henrietta), sitting on the porch, was the first to notice that there was a strange man standing on the sidewalk outside their house. He was stylishly dressed, tall, slim. His dark hair was carefully styled in a sharp sidecut, and although he was across the street from Henrietta, the man seemed to be holding back a smile, lips curling around the cigar they held. He stood, looking at the two police cars in the driveway, looking at Henrietta's flushed and tear-streaked face. His gaze moved to the wall of the house, as if he could see what was happening within.

An odd instinct stirred Henrietta. She rose with a wet sniffle and descended the porch steps, smoothing her wrinkled, slept-in dress. She crossed the yard, then the street, stopping before the man. She remained out of arm's reach. He towered over her, a full six inches taller than her Jeremy.

He was definitely fighting back a smile, unsuccessfully.

"Did something happen?" It asked, pinching the cigar between its slender fingertips.

"Who are you?"

Robert's large green eyes seemed to flash, or spark, or crackle, or some combination of the three. "It's so hard to keep an eye on kids these days. You turn around for one second and they're gone right into thin air. Like smoke."

"Who the hell are you?"

"Jeremy made it back? He would have been able to speak to the police sooner if he wasn't galivanting with that little whore, am I right?" There was laughter in his voice.

"What the fuck?"

"Best of luck to you both. Hopefully Susan turns up."

"Who are you?! What did you do with Susan?!" Henrietta lunged at Robert, fingers curled into claws. It stepped back out of her reach. "Jeremy!"

Two women emerged from Susan's house, worry writ large upon their faces. Her friends, come to comfort her, who had given her a moment of peace on the porch and now saw her accosting an innocent bystander.

Robert lowered Its voice to a whisper. "She wanted to see the circus."

Henrietta dug her sharp pink nails into Robert's lapels and dragged It down to her level.

It dropped Its cigar, and Its chuckle echoed in Its throat behind Its tightly-pressed smile. Robert's eyes cut through her, down to her soul. "You're right to blame yourself. Maybe if you hadn't been drinking, you would have noticed her absence sooner."

"I swear to God, if you've laid a hand on her —"

"Henri!" The women grabbed Henrietta and pulled her back. Robert straightened Its suit, smile gone, brow furrowed with concern. One of the friends began to sputter an apology, but Robert waved her off.

"It's fine, no harm done."

"You bastard!" Henrietta spat.

"Henri!"

"I'll be going. I'm sorry, I don't know what I've done to upset her."

Henrietta's friends were still physically restraining her from attacking Robert. "I'll find you, you piece of shit, and whatever you've done to my daughter —"

"I assure you, I have nothing to hide," Robert insisted. "I'll be happy to cooperate with the police, if it makes you feel any better. Here's my card." It took a business card from inside the inner pocket of Its suit jacket, which one of Henrietta's friends plucked from Its fingers with a look of apology.

"Sorry about all this," the other friend said. They began to drag Henrietta away. Robert gave her a curt nod and walked back down the sidewalk.

"No! He knows about Susan! He *laughed at me!*"

"Henri, he wasn't laughing. Come on now. Let's get you inside."

Henrietta tried to tear her arms free. "He's getting away!"

"He gave us his card. We'll have the police send someone over. It has his name and work address. Look."

The card was waved in front of Henrietta's face. The cardstock was dirtied to a greyish white, and framed in red. The swirling, silver letters read:

*Pennywise the Dancing Clown*

*Entertaining the People of Derry Since 1723*

*29 Neibolt Street, Derry, Maine*

Henrietta was too stunned to offer any further resistance as she was towed into her home. The card disappeared after she set it on her nightstand. She did not bring up the incident to her husband, and her friends thought it prudent not to burden him with additional worries about his wife.

---

"Are my parents worried?"

"They've noticed you've gone, but they think you're playing a trick on them."

Susan wrinkled her nose. "You sure? They have to think something is up by now."

"Guess you'll just have to stay..."

Susan frowned, bag of popcorn in her hand forgotten, unease back. She decided that she would leave the next time It disappeared on one of Its mysterious trips, God knew where It went.

It kept a corner of Its mind watching her when It left to torment an old lumberjack with memories of his dead wife. Susan was still in the

grip of the circus illusion, wandering around in circles in the bowels of the well house. She was looking for a way out, but she wouldn't find it within the billowing, shadowy tent. Not while It still had control over her. The sides of the tent were smooth, and pegged tightly to the dirt, no entrance flap to be found. She attempted to punch her tiny fist through the fabric, but it was unyielding. When It returned, she did not mention her attempts at escape.

---

Susan's second morning below 29 Neibolt Street dawned with Susan's statement that she wanted to be taken home to get ready for school. She began to gather up her bedding.

"I'd rather you didn't leave just yet. Stay. Have some fun. Eat some cotton candy." It conjured a stick of cotton candy with the old snap-behind-the-ear trick and handed it to her.

In a burst of temper, Susan threw the candy to the ground and yelled, "I'm not having fun!"

"You. Will. Stay. *HERE*." Its eyes flashed a sickly, evil yellow; needle teeth sprouted from Its gums.

Susan fell back and sprawled on grass tamped down by countless, imaginary, circus-going feet. Terror wafted across the space between them, making It salivate, making It hungry. The curves of Its painted-on smile began to bleed, drops of red paint rolling upwards from the cheetah slashes through Its eyes; claws ripped at the fingers of Its greyish gloves.

"I'll be back in a jiffy."

With a pop, Pennywise was gone. Susan let out a soft sob and got to her feet. She wrapped her arms around herself and shuffled to go sit near the stage, where the show continued in full swing, leaving the cotton candy forgotten.

It returned to Its crafted circus tent later in the evening. Hoping that Susan would have fallen asleep. She had not.

"I want to go home."

"Stop saying that, *please*."

"I don't want to be here."

"Right now I don't care what you want, Susie."

"I'll scream."

"You tried that already. No one heard you."

"But you'll hear me." Hunger had made her recalcitrant.

Its face twisted into an exaggerated grimace. "I have another idea." It put Its hands on Its knees and leaned close. "How about you play nice –" Its pupils grew to slits and Its mouth stretched into a sharp-toothed grin, "– and I don't eat your face."

"If you were going to hurt me, you would have already." Susan was sharp. Sharper than It had anticipated. "You aren't going to do anything to me. I don't think this is real. *Any of it.*"

The circus evaporated like an exhale of condensation on a windowpane. The whites of Pennywise's eyes turned crimson, Its lips pulled back in a snarl and Its brows lowered into a scowl. Susan hesitated for only a moment as she took in the cistern around her. The filthy frozen puddles, the tower of junk, the shadowed tunnels. She didn't look too hard, knowing she would lose her nerve. Fear trembled at the edge of her mind, but she remained firm.

"I'm leaving." Susan set her jaw, gripped the straps of her backpack, turned, and ran. She chose a tunnel at random.

Its shriek of rage echoed after her, and she could hear It pursuing her. Crunching thin layers of sewer-water ice, scratching along the tunnel wall, clicking and buzzing and screeching. She no longer feared It above all else. More than It, she feared never seeing her family again, never sleeping in her own bed again, never going to class again. She missed her toothbrush, and her front door, and her mother's pancakes, and her father's cologne. And so she ran. She did not flee in terror; she forged ahead in determination. She would go home. She would leave the clown.

She did not look back, and so she did not see her death. It lunged, jabbing out with a long, crablike limb.

She no longer feared It. *It*, the immortal evil, the lurking terror, the nightmare come true.

It had pampered her, catered to her whims, entertained her.

It had been too caught up in Its... *pathetic* desire for something of what humans had that It lacked. Too caught up to see the danger growing under Its nose, too distracted to see that Its advantage was slipping, that Susan was learning.

It had grown soft.

The claw speared through Susan's backpack and chest and pinned her to the cement. The sound of the impacted reverberated through the tunnel. She died instantly, heart and spine destroyed.

For a long moment the spiderlike abomination hunched over Susan's corpse. It removed Its limb from her body with a soft sucking sound. Her blood seeped into the grey water. Gloved fingers formed at the ends of the crabbish leg, stretched out and gripped Susan's shoulder and turned her over. Its fingers ran along her torn breastbone, swept wet blonde hair from her blank face, traced her pink scar.

It wished she would have listened to It. Sharp Susan. Too sharp for her own good. Then It squashed that thought immediately. It scooped her up in Its mandibles and carried her back to the cistern. Her meat would not go to waste.

---

It remained awake for six months more, stalking and tormenting and consuming the people of Derry, crescendoing in a final act of violence caused by Its presence in the very fabric of the town: a gas station robbery – turned hostage situation – turned shootout. One of the hostages was never recovered. Appetite satiated, It retreated belowground to sleep. But not before It did two things:

First, It slipped back into the skin of Robert Gray and walked down to Susan's house in the dimming light of early evening. The police cars

were long gone, questions asked, avenues of investigation exhausted. One parent remained home at all times, in case Susan returned or a captor called to demand ransom. It listened with Its vast consciousness, and heard Henrietta and Jeremy planning another search through the woods for Susan's remains. Robert left without drawing attention to Itself.

Second, It retrieved Alex's train from where it moldered under decades' worth of leaves and soil, and Susan's bear from her cold, stale bedroom. It set Its trophies (mementos? tokens? remembrances?) at the base of Its tower of junk. As a reminder. Precisely of what, It didn't dwell on.

And It slept.

## 8. The Train and the Bear

A/N: Today I learned that "greywater" is an actual word. It refers to "the relatively clean waste water from baths, sinks, washing machines, and other kitchen appliances." Hm. I prefer Eddie's definition.

No reference to the Dark Tower series intended. Or is it...

The Losers approach... ever closer...

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*August 1st, 1988 – October 14th, 1988*

It awoke feeling two things: hunger and petulance. The hunger was to be expected, present every time It rose from Its slumber. The foul temper was something else; it didn't stem from the aching need for food that roused It, that much It could sense. It did not hunger like the mortals, didn't immediately have Its mood ruined by waking up with an appetite. Hunger was part of Its existence, part of Its nature. The only time It wasn't hungry was right before It went to sleep. It was used to being hungry.

Its dreams had been full of frustration, disappointment.

It struggled to orient Itself, grumbling and clicking and snarling, mass of insectoid flesh twisting and bunching until a stained white glove emerged, then a ruffled arm. A warmup. A pompom-adorned shoe, a long and lanky leg, a large and painted face topped with a mane of orange hair. The painted smile was spoiled by Its scowl, eyes glowing orange-yellow from under Its brow. It sniffed at the dank sewer air with Its round red nose, then sneezed. Old, wet, neglected. The sewers hadn't changed. Aboveground, it was the end of summer. Fall was approaching, the weather still hot but cooler temperatures around the corner.

As It mentally retraced Its past few Derry feasts, It melted down into a thickly muscled, coiling snake. Its white scales shone with a sheen of sewer-damp, Its beady red eyes bulged, Its purple-ish tongue flickered. There had been a girl. Susan. And before that a boy named

Alex. Alex had been the first, but the girl was more important. Its mouth opened, exposing jaws lined with rows upon rows of teeth, all the way down into the gullet. The jaws spread wider, and wider still, folding back until a hunchbacked white rat clawed Its way out of the snake's throat. It had kept Susan down here. It had wanted her to stay with It. Why? For how long? It did not know and did not wish to ponder the specifics. Dwelling on the subject too much made It *uncomfortable*. The snake's limp body dissolved in a puff of white not-smoke. The rat rubbed Its whiskers with Its crooked paws. Susan had not wanted to stay with It, even though It gave her the circus, even though It gave her everything she wanted. Well, almost everything she wanted. As soon as she wanted something more than she wanted to stay safe from It, stay on Its good side, the smoke had blown away and the mirrors shattered. The rat convulsed, screeched, and in a blur of motion stretched up into the form of Robert Grey. Its eyes were still blood-red, and one lolled at an odd angle. It rapped on Robert's temple with Its knuckles and the eyes righted themselves. Susan had made It angry, and It had lost Its temper. It had a tendency to do that, It could admit. If It had to choose a weakness.

Susan had ruined everything. Robert's mouth opened in a sharp-toothed roar. Then It composed Itself. Enough of that. That was what had gotten Susan killed. That and her bratty lack of gratitude. It wasn't *totally* at fault. She started it.

Robert gave Itself a shake and It was back to Pennywise. Its yellow eyes wandered to the train and bear at the base of the junk tower, nestled together next to the stage cart. The bear had a faint odor of love, affection, happiness. Old but detectable. Buck teeth exposed in a grimace, It glanced up at where a dozen or so bodies usually floated around the peak of the tower. Nothing. Its pantry was depleted.

It had had Its fill of wallowing. It was hungry.

---

The first kill It took quickly, dispatching the small grocery store's janitor with a quick twist of his head and whisking his body away to the sewer tunnels to be eaten in privacy. The scraps of the janitor's uniform and one of his shoes floated away on the creeping greywater current.

No longer utterly famished, It could now savor Its prey. Next was a girl scout selling cookies. She disappeared seconds after ringing a doorbell, and the homeowner opened the door to find the porch empty. It mocked and tormented the girl inside the ever-changing rooms of the well house until she was nothing but a screaming and sobbing mess, then ate her and the cookies she had been carrying too. The cookies tasted like nothing, but It thought it was funny.

The homeowner forgot about the doorbell-ringer disappearing, a result of the infamous Derry memory that It worked to keep short-term and watertight as a sieve. The less attention It attracted to Itself the better; there were forces in this universe that It would prefer to remain unaware of Its presence.

A drunk that fell asleep in his car in the bar's parking lot vanished, nothing but his empty truck found the next morning. Then an infant was whisked from the swing set while her mother went inside to relieve herself, blood and wolf tracks leading to an open-and-shut case: freakishly large and hungry wolf prowling the woods bordering the back yard, small and tender baby. Connect the dots. An eight-year-old girl was abducted on her way home from the arcade, last seen talking with a tall, slender, dark-haired white male that no witness could identify and who ushered her in the opposite direction of her home. A family out on a light hike allowed their teenaged son to run ahead; after going around a bend in the path and out of sight, he was never seen again. An extensive search turned up only the bandana he had kept in his pocket to mop his face.

Crime spiked, tempers were short.

The citizens of Derry raised their eyebrows and shook their heads over the rash of tragedies that hit the town. It was sad and unfortunate, to lose two adults and four children in the span of a month and a half, but one must move on.

---

Alex's aged, faded truck and Susan's damp, moldering teddy bear remained at the base of the tower near the stage, in clear view should It look in that direction. Occasionally, It directed a glare or a frown or an irritable howl at the pair of toys. Whenever Its mind began to wander toward what exactly It had been hoping to accomplish with

Alex and Susan, what exactly the failed attempts had been attempts at, It quickly reined Its thoughts in. It briefly considered moving the relics of Its failed *outliers* to the interior of the tower, or even to the back side, but to do so would be to admit to the discomfort the sight of them caused It. It would surrender to no toy.

---

It smelled rain coming. It liked the rain, liked to taste what the town flushed down the storm drains, liked the humidity forming condensation on the concrete walls of the sewer. And this would be a downpour. There were always a few kids out playing in the puddles the storm left behind, splashing around on the sidewalks and roads. Parents preferred to stay inside, out of the wet, leaving the children unguarded. Less work for It.

## 9. Down the Drain

A/N: *Georgie enters, stage left*

Catching up with the film took longer than I expected when starting out. I'd apologize, but I had fun along the way.

Reviews give me life.

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*October 15th, 1988*

The storm hit in the early hours of Saturday morning, and did not disappoint. Rain came down in sheets, further cooling the already chill atmosphere and drenching the town. The Kenduskeag gorged and overflowed its banks, carrying loose sediment and leaves and sticks along its rushing current. The denizens of the forest hid in their lairs and beds, weathering the downpour. The people of Derry peered through their windows and frowned. Only a few braved the ankle-deep puddles and diagonal rainfall to fetch groceries or relieve their dogs. Parents ordered their children to stay indoors. Some obeyed, some did not.

It liked the wet, the cold. It was a creature of damp and rot and mildew and mold. It giggled and snickered to Itself as It darted about below the city, skittering footsteps echoing in a splashing staccato through the tunnels of the sewer.

Moisture enhanced scents, made them more vivid. It tasted the misery and discontent of Derry as a chef samples the fruits of his toils over the stove. This was *Its* town on this strange little rock spinning through the stars of the Milky Way. *Its* wretched little cattle. Nearly every harsh word, raised fist, and careless lie a result of *Its* consciousness. As pressure forms a diamond, so the Eater of Children had pressed Derry into a town of *Its* own making.

It wet *Its* palate on missed opportunities, lost loves, unachievable dreams, simmering resentments. It inhaled Derry's perfume as it rose from the soggy wet leaves that It crushed under *Its* insectoid claws. It nosed through garbage that drifted on the greywater and piled up

around corners and grates, smelling alcoholic rages and self-hatred-fueled junk food binges.

Little rubber-clad feet clomped on the blacktop overhead. It chittered to Itself with amusement, excitement. A six-year-old boy, alone and unattended, chasing his paper boat along the street. Georgie and the S. S. Georgie. His brother, Bill, had made the boat for him. Georgie's parents didn't know he was outside. He had been told to remain indoors. Plenty of meat on his bones. Perfect.

Georgie jogged down the street, every footfall sending up a spray of water. Rain trickled into the neck of his yellow rain jacket and wetting his sweater, but he was having too much fun to notice. It followed belowground, tracking his progress and keeping pace, oversize tongue lolling from Its mandibles, eyes bright, waiting for the proper opportunity to present Itself. The boat was moving at a swift clip, and would outpace the child eventually. Sure, It could strike lightning-quick from the drain before Georgie had time to wonder what had happened, but what was the fun of that?

Georgie whooped and giggled, eyes fixed on his wax-coated boat and not on where he was going. He ducked under the first sawhorse standing guard in front of a pothole and didn't sense the second until he ran face-first into it. Georgie fell flat onto the road with a splash, but was undeterred. He brushed off the tumble and began closing the distance between himself and the boat. Closer, closer.

He gasped when he saw how quickly the S. S. Georgie was approaching the storm drain ahead. "No!" He put on a fresh burst of speed.

The paper boat was swept from the road and into Its waiting claws in the darkness below. Too late, the child skidded to his knees in front of the drain.

"No, no, no, Bill's gonna kill me," Georgie muttered.

He peered into the blackness inside the drain, contemplating diving down after the boat. It didn't occur to him that Bill could easily make another. No, this one was special.

It ran Its purple-ish tongue along Its insectoid chops. *Showtime.*

A pair of glowing yellow eyes winked into existence in the darkness. Georgie let out a startled yelp and fell back to his seat. The flash of fear hit Its nostrils like a sniff of smelling salts, or a light dusting of coke.

The floating eyes shifted closer. It adopted a goofy, high-pitched tone. "Hiya, Georgie!" It moved into view, allowing the sunlight to fall across Its makeup-caked face, morphing Its eyes to blue, lips pulling back in a friendly smile. It held the boat up for Georgie to see. "What a nice boat. Do you want it back?"

"Um," Georgie's voice trembled, and he gulped as he noticed that one of the clown's eyes was looking off to his side. "Yes, please."

Such manners, even while frightened. Draw the interaction out, lap up more of that delicious fear.

It could smell the boat. A mingled scent of kindness and love wafted from the wax-covered paper. It could detect that all-too-familiar stench even under Georgie's fear. It shoved aside thoughts of trains and bears.

"You look like a nice boy. I bet you have a lot of friends."

"Three, but my brother is my best-best."

The source of the smell. The brothers' bond was a strong one, mostly unsullied by Its influence. Already, that bond had imprinted on this folded paper that Georgie placed so much importance in. That he was so concerned about.

It couldn't help the drool that began sliding down Its chin. "And where is he?" Oh It knew, It knew very well. Back at home, far from his little brother.

"In bed, sick."

It pretended to have an idea. "I bet I could cheer him up. I'll give him a balloon."

This proclamation was met with a puzzled and worried silence from Georgie.

"Do you want a balloon too, Georgie?" The rain was masking Its salivation; the kid surely would have already tried to beat a retreat if he could see It was slavering like a rabid coyote.

Georgie was quick on the draw. "I'm not supposed to take stuff from strangers."

"Oh." It chuckled breathily. "Well, I'm Pennywise the *Dancing Clown*." It gave Its bells a shake. "Pennywise... yes, meet Georgie." It gestured to the boy. "Georgie, meet Pennywise." This earned a snicker from Georgie. "Now we aren't strangers, are we?"

Georgie smiled down at him. The *goodness* rising from the boat almost made Its eyes water. Love had gone into the making of this scrap of paper. Alex. Susan. It had failed (at what?). Keeping Its composure was becoming difficult, holding back Its needle teeth and yellow eyes and beetle-ish claws.

An older woman came out of a nearby house to tend to the blinds on her porch. She noticed Georgie kneeling with his face almost in the storm drain. No matter. She was of no consequence. She would forget as soon as she turned away.

"What are you doing in the sewer?" An astute question.

"Well, a storm blew me away. Blew the whole circus away." It grew somber, concentrating. "Can you smell the circus, Georgie?" It brought the smell of circus concessions rising from the filthy sewer. "Peanuts, cotton candy, hotdogs, *and...?*" It waited for Georgie to fill in the blank for himself.

"Popcorn?"

"Popcorn!" It created a strong cloud of caramel popcorn scent that almost washed the stink of affection and care from Its red-painted nostrils. "Is that your favorite?" It knew it was, why did It ask? Because it was fun, why else?

"Uh huh!"

"Mine too!" It let out a braying laugh as Its fingers pinched harshly into the smooth, slick side of the S. S. Georgie. There was a buzzing behind Its eyes that Georgie couldn't hear, a vibrating. The continental groaning of tectonic plates under strain. "Because they pop! Pop! Pop! Pop, pop, pop!"

Georgie giggled, unease fading, and It giggled back. Its mirth wasn't entirely manufactured; It enjoyed a goofy time, would have enjoyed making Georgie laugh even if the thrice-damned turtle himself appeared and whisked the boy out of harm's way. Because it was fun.

The turtle. Who was Maturin's beam-brother again? Oh yes, the bear, Shardik. The bear. The train. Alex. Susan. Their love-soaked belongings sitting in Its lair as trophies? reminders? The love that emanated from the S. S. Georgie. The hunger twisting inside of It. The warring impulses, the mounting pressure.

Its face went slack, like a powered-down animatronic.

That was a step too far for Georgie. A bit too weird. "Um... I should get going now."

Its meal was escaping. It recovered Itself with a blink and a gulp. "Oh. Without your boat?" It brought the boat back into view.

Georgie bit his lip. He knew it was time to hit the trail.

"You don't want to lose it, Georgie." And the kicker – "Bill's gonna kill you." The smile was back. Charming, friendly. "Here. Take it."

Still Georgie hesitated.

Hunger and bloodlust and that damned buzzing deepened Its voice. "Take it, Georgie."

He leaned forward, arm outstretched. A spasm of something – indecision? cruelty? – caused It to jerk the boat back, out of reach, before It offered the toy again.

Tender little fingers wiggled in Its face. It grasped Georgie's wrist and yanked, jaws opening wide to clamp Its rows of angler fish teeth down on the boy's arm right at the elbow. Its fangs passed clean

through the flesh, and Georgie flung himself backwards with a scream. He dragged himself across the road with his remaining arm, wailing and sobbing, blood gushing from the torn tissue and coloring the water flowing over the blacktop. The severed limb disappeared down Its gullet with a series of wet crunches as Its constricting throat crushed the radius and ulna to pieces. Licking blood from Its lips and chin, It stretched Its arm out, out, farther than it had any right to stretch, and locked Its gloved hand around Georgie's green rainboot.

Georgie yelled, "Billy!" as It pulled him across the road. Such a silly, illogical thing to do. Billy was nowhere within earshot, couldn't do a damn thing even if he was, even if he was standing right next to his brother. As if Billy could help.

That was why It loved kids.

Loved them.

L-O-V-E-D

Rainwater ran into Georgie's eyes, blurring his vision. The fingernails of his remaining hand bent and broke as he clawed at the road in a vain attempt to resist the clown. Pain consumed his shoulder and flared out to burn at his neck and side like acid. He'd emptied his bladder in his rain-soaked jeans. A combination of words and screams tore from his throat, but he had no control over what he was saying. Fear had taken over. He was vaguely aware of the concrete lip of the storm drain cracking the back of his skull and of gravel gouging his chin. Then there was darkness, and cold water, and slick sludge, and the pain. Consuming, overwhelming. Nothing he had felt in his life could compare. Above it all was the fear. The fear that only comes with a living nightmare.

He stared into the blackness, foul water dripping into his open mouth, hand clutching at the warm and blood-slick hole in his raincoat where his arm had been a moment before, only pausing his screams to draw breath.

And in those pauses between his echoing shrieks, he heard it. The circus. Children singing and laughing, balloons swelling with air, drums and horns and cymbals, popcorn popping, an elephant

trumpeting. A single coherent thought flitted through Georgie's frayed mind before unconsciousness took him.

Pennywise had told the truth about the circus.

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A/N: *Georgie exits, stage right, sans arm*

I don't normally like re-enactments of scenes word-for-word, but I didn't want to skip over the drain scene, especially since this AU version of *It* is experiencing something a little different than the canon version. Things will get AU from here, although I will try to keep everyone in-character as much as I can.

## 10. Amputee

A/N: Here's where things go full canon divergence, buckle up.

Been listening to Of Monsters and Men a lot and had *Black Water* on repeat as I wrote this. Consider it an OST of sorts, not just for this piece, but for all of our characters in this miserable fic, present and future.

Reviews make me smile.

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*October 15th, 1988*

Georgie woke to white-hot, blinding pain that licked at his elbow like fire and raced up his bicep to consume his shoulder. He didn't realize he was shrieking and writhing, clutching at his upper arm and beating his rubber heels against the ground, rolling from side to side. His face was twisted with his screams, eyes shut and mouth gaping.

It frowned at Georgie from where It squatted just a few feet away.

A single, clear thought pierced the fog of pain in Georgie's mind: *Stop that. Settle down.* He heard, and understood, but could not obey. He continued to cry and moan, clawing at the shredded sleeve of his raincoat.

The clown's eyes flashed yellow, and Georgie's agony dulled to a bearable throb that kept time with his galloping, tripping pulse. He turned his head and vomited the remains of his morning oatmeal. He kept his eyes tightly shut, holding back sobs. Mind clearing, he became aware that he was cold. Very cold. And wet. Water had seeped into his boots and raincoat, soaking every inch of clothing. He smelled mold and rot. His teeth began to knock together, both from the chill and shock.

He had heard a voice. Was someone else with him? Georgie opened his eyes. There was only darkness, formless and complete. "H-hello?" He tentatively felt around the torn sleeve of his raincoat, feeling where his arm should be, breath beginning to come in sharp gasps.

He had been chasing the boat Bill made for him. And he had seen something, down in the storm drain. A man. A clown? It had attacked him.

No, something else must have happened, some sort of accident, and he had dreamed the clown. He needed to get help. He needed Bill, his parents. Even a stranger. His arm was gone. His arm was gone and he could feel the sharp nub of bone where it had been.

Georgie rolled to his uninjured side. "Hello? Is someone in here?" His voice echoed back at him. Where was he? A sob escaped, despite his best efforts. He crawled forward, dragging himself with his good hand. He felt rough cement under several inches of cold, moving water. Soggy leaves, bits of paper and plastic. Another hiccupping cry. How was he going to get home if he didn't know where he was, couldn't even see? He didn't care if Bill or his parents were mad with him. Getting home was all he cared about.

"*Hiya, Georgie.*"

Georgie clenched his spasming jaw, a whimper leaking through his teeth. He recognized that voice.

With a small *pop*, the clown winked into view to his right, clearly visible despite the total lack of light. *Pennywise*. Pennywise was squatting on Its haunches, gloved hands clasping Its knees. The clown's suit was completely dry, even though Georgie could hear water flowing and was himself completely soaked. Its eyes glowed an unnatural blue, Its buck-toothed grin making Georgie vaguely nauseous again.

"Do you know where you *are*?"

"No. I'm wet, and I'm hurt, and I just really need..."

"Do you remember what *happened*?"

"A little." Georgie's voice broke on a sob. Maybe he was still dreaming. "Mister, I'm hurt really bad, and I need to get back home."

Sensing that Its usual charms weren't doing It any good in this case, It dropped the goofy smile.

"What... where am I?"

"The sewer."

"How did I get here? What happened?"

It supplied the explanation his mind already had, the *easier* one. "An accident."

"Am I dreaming?"

Such a question would normally have stirred Its ire. Instead, It grinned, briefly. "Nope."

Georgie was dizzy, and cold, and scared, and confused, and his arm hurt, and his head hurt, and little spots were twirling in his vision, and this weird clown didn't want to tell him what was going on. He hung his head, nose touching the greywater current he could feel but not see, and began to softly cry.

Pennywise watched Georgie's despair for a long moment. It had no problem seeing in the dark. Its too-blue eyes took in Georgie's spit and snot and vomit, the trail of red leading to his mangled limb. It reached out, bells around Its wrist tinkling, and tapped Georgie on the forehead. He jerked sharply, as if shocked. The cold was gone. The wet was gone. The muck was gone. The dark was gone. The red-and-white striped walls of a tent surrounded him. A small tent, almost a teepee, lit with a soft light from up near the peak. Under his hands was not grime and street runoff but hard-packed dirt and a thin layer of dry hay. His clothes were dry. The ache in his arm was still there, a constant pulsing. It was hard to keep his head lifted.

"You must be *tired*." Pennywise plucked a blanket from thin air and draped it over Georgie's body. "Perhaps a nap is in order, yes?"

"I need... to go home..."

"Not in this state." It placed a hand on Georgie's head.

He didn't so much fall asleep as pass out from shock and blood loss and a little bit of Its eldritch magic, facedown in the hay.

Pennywise stooped over the boy's sleeping form. Fragile though they ultimately were, humans could be surprisingly resilient. The vessels and arteries in Georgie's arm had constricted, slowing blood loss, and the blood coating the torn flesh and broken bone had coagulated as best it could in the soaking wet. His body was shutting down all non-vital functions, like consciousness and digestion, in an attempt to divert all resources to keeping his heart beating and his lungs breathing and as much blood as possible inside the body instead of out. The more blood he lost, the less efficiently his body would be able to keep itself alive. He was currently bleeding at an unsustainable rate, despite his body's efforts.

It had been five minutes since It had taken his arm in a single bite (and had some odd, impulsive burst of whimsy). The clean severance and cold temperatures were in Georgie's favor. It gave him another five minutes before he was beyond saving. Maybe less than that.

It frowned and clicked Its jaws together. The irritating indecision had not left. Pennywise crouched and clamped a hand firmly around Georgie's bicep, right above the ruined elbow. The trickle of blood slowed to a sluggish seep. The fingers of Its greyish glove turned red. It pressed Its other hand against the stump, feeling blood seep through the palm of the glove. A sizzling sound rose from Its hands, and the smell of burning flesh filled the air. Georgie didn't so much as flinch; he was as deeply asleep as one drugged.

It stepped back, admiring Its rather neat cauterization job. There, hypothermia and exsanguination taken care of. That would at least give It some time to think. What did It need to think about? Damned if It knew.

Pennywise cocked Its oversized head to the side, probing out with Its mind. First, It dialed in to Bill's mental wavelength, the older brother. The one who had made the S. S. Georgie and sent its namesake out in the storm to play despite their parents' orders. Bill had already noticed something amiss; Georgie wasn't answering his walkie talkie. Bill's queries were met with staticky silence. Georgie's walkie was ruined, electrical components waterlogged, and the hunk of plastic lay where it had fallen from Georgie's pocket inside the mouth of the storm drain. Bill was concerned. The parents would be alerted soon. Boring.

It found the little paper S. S. Georgie floating on the speeding current of storm runoff, already a nearly a quarter mile from them. It snapped Its bloody fingers and the boat materialized in Its palm. It set the boat by Georgie's outstretched hand, then flopped onto Its belly and arched Its back, planting Its feet on either side of Its head as easily as a practiced gymnast, chin resting on Its crossed arms. The soft light of the tent faded away. The only sounds were the thundering storm aboveground, water tumbling into storm drains and flowing through tunnels and dripping from overhead, all muffled by the fabric of the tent. The only thing visible was a pair of vivid yellow eyes, unmoving and unblinking. It stared at Georgie, and thought.

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A/N: I'll be working on other projects and deadlines for the next two weeks or so, therefore it will be a little bit before I update this fic again. Don't worry, I really like this fic and have some ideas on where I want to take it. It won't be abandoned.

## 11. Chill

A/N: Sorry for the wait. Here's a Bill-centric chapter for you all. A glimpse of what we didn't get to see in the movies.

Thank you to those who have followed, favorited, reviewed, or even just read. You guys are the reason I upload at all.

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*October 15th, 1988*

"Georgie?" Bill licked his chapped lips and sat up straighter in his bed, removing his thumb from the walkie-talkie's button, listening. No response. "Juh-Georgie?" Static white noise. He gave a watery, mucus-clogged sniff and brushed strands of sweaty hair from his forehead. "Georgie, cuh-come on, answer me."

It had only been fifteen minutes or so since Georgie had gone outside, hardly long enough to begin worrying just yet. But Georgie always responded immediately. Hell, he was usually the one pestering Bill. And the static...

Georgie had probably gotten the walkie wet and ruined it without realizing, that was all. Their dad would be mad that Georgie had snuck outside without permission and ruined a toy, but it wasn't a really big deal.

Bill swallowed, sore throat working, and set his walkie down on the comforter, next to his leg. He needed to calm down. Georgie would be back soon; he never had much tolerance for cold and rain together and he'd be all played-out before long.

Heaving a sigh, Bill snuggled back down into bed and bunched the covers up around his chin. He'd rest for a few more minutes, then he'd try again. If Georgie still didn't answer well... he'd cross that bridge when he got to it.

The seconds ticked by. Bill couldn't rest, couldn't relax his muscles and stop picturing Georgie returning with a cold as bad as Bill's own. They'd never hear the end of it from their mother then. Without

turning over or even opening his eyes, Bill groped around for the walkie and brought it to his lips. "Juh-juh-Georgie?" Nothing.

Already mentally running through the dressing-down he would give Georgie, he flung back the covers and set his feet on the floor. His congested head throbbed with the motion, and goosebumps prickled his skin. "Damn it."

Bill padded over to the window and peered out through the rain-streaked pane. No Georgie. That would have been too easy. He now faced a choice: to sneak out himself and bring Georgie back, risking being caught by their parents on their return; or tell his parents now and endure a lecture while they drove around the neighborhood and looked for Georgie. The decision was easy.

Not bothering to change out of his pajamas, Bill yanked on his jeans, boots, sweater, and rain jacket. He stuffed the so-far-useless walkie into his pocket. His parents were deeply engrossed in a discussion on bills and the budget, so he was able to sneak out the front door with comparative ease. He could only hope it would be so easy to return inside unseen, with Georgie in tow.

His bike was on the porch, propped next to the front door, thank God. He didn't want to be out here any longer than he had to, and with his bike he'd cover ground twice as fast. He carried it down the front steps, rain hitting his hood with a loud rattle as soon as his boot touched cement. Shit, it was really coming down. Water was already flecking his face. Positioning his feet on the pedals was awkward in his rain boots, but doable. Bill chose an arbitrary direction – God knew where Georgie had run off to – and began pedaling.

The tires hissed through the water pooling on the sidewalk and threw droplets up against his back. The seat of his jeans would be soaked. The wind blew rain into the face of his jacket and down his collar. Mucus-clogged lungs unable to work at full capacity, Bill was soon out of breath. His joints ached and his head pounded in time with his pulse. Barely five minutes after leaving the house, he was freezing and tired. And no sign of Georgie. The brat was gonna get an earful.

Bill decided to zigzag through the streets of their neighborhood. Georgie couldn't have gotten far, but Bill had no idea which direction

he had gone in. Down one block, then two, then three. Turn. Another three. How far could the little pest have gone? Turn. Four more blocks. Bill's hurried pedaling brought on a bout of wet coughs, and he had to pause and brace his and the bike's weight on one leg to catch his breath. His nose was starting to run too, and of course he hadn't thought to bring a tissue. Not like it would have had a prayer in this storm, though. How much time had passed? Ten minutes, maybe. His parents probably hadn't noticed he was out of bed yet. Scrubbing his nose futilely on his wet, slick jacket sleeve, Bill grit his teeth and resumed pedaling.

The streets and houses ran together into an endless cold, wet, shivering stream. No Georgie. Not even a sign of Georgie. No broken walkie lying on the sidewalk, no crumpled paper boat flattened on the street, no lone green rubber boot peeking out of the grass. Nothing. Anger and worry warred in Bill's mind. He was scared by how Georgie had seemingly disappeared into thin air, then angry when he thought of how Georgie was probably off fine somewhere and completely oblivious of the trouble he was causing, then angry with himself for being scared. And the cycle would repeat itself.

At least half an hour had passed and Bill had gone farther than Georgie could have. Georgie must have slipped past him and gone back home. Or maybe he'd been hiding in the bushes when Bill came outside and let him go on his wild goose chase as some sort of joke. That was probably it.

His parents would have noticed he was out of bed by now. Any hope Bill had of retrieving Georgie and slipping inside unnoticed was gone. He returned home, bracing himself for the shitstorm he knew would come.

His parents were waiting, and his mother came out onto the porch before he had even made it up the driveway. She didn't ask why he was out of bed, or why he was biking around in the rain. The first thing she asked was, "Where is Georgie?"

Bill stopped, bike in hand, one foot on the bottom step. His father came outside to stand beside his mother.

"We've looked all over the house for him," Mrs. Denbrough continued,

voice taking on an irritated edge. "Where is he?"

Georgie might have hidden from Bill as a game, but he would not have hidden from their parents. Georgie knew they didn't find that sort of thing funny.

Bill was frozen on the bottom step, bike clenched in his numb fingers, rain dripping into his eyes. Georgie hadn't come home. The first icy edges of panic began to prick at his chest, the first edges of what would become a solid, glacial block that would replace his heart and lungs for the next weeks.

Mr. Denbrough furrowed his brow and bent to peer into Bill's face. "Son?"

Bill felt his eyes burning. This was his fault, this was all his fault, oh God it was all his fault Georgie was missing. "I c-c-c-can't fuh-find him."

Mr. Denbrough straightened, clenching his jaw. Mrs. Denbrough put a hand over her heart as she turned to gaze out into the storm.

"Bill, change into something dry. We're going to drive around and look for Georgie," Mr. Denbrough spoke in the barking tone he used when he was worried and trying not to show it. "Sharon, stay here in case Georgie comes home."

"Zack –"

"Come on, Bill."

"Zack! Should we call the police?"

"Not yet. Bill."

As Bill fumbled with his seatbelt, fingers shaking, wet hair dampening his clean shirt collar, he felt compelled to defend himself. "I told him not to, I tried to stop him, but he wouldn't listen." The lie flowed from him easily, worryingly easily.

"It's ok, son." Mr. Denbrough was hardly listening, thoughts far away, on his missing child.

But it wasn't going to be ok, Bill knew that deep in his gut in a way he couldn't explain. Things had gone horribly, irreversibly wrong and it was all his fault, and he couldn't bear the thought of his parents holding him responsible for it, knowing he had put Georgie in harm's way. So he lied. And as the wipers squeaked across the windshield and the tires ate up the blocks and Mr. Denbrough's knuckles grew white on the wheel, Bill felt that guilt beginning to gnaw a hole through his soul.

---

The Eater of Children sneezed and turned Its attention back to the leg It was chewing on. Boring.

---

A/N: Figured the chapter shouldn't be entirely without our favorite clown.

## 12. Gratitude

*October 16th, 1988*

Pain woke Georgie again, although this time it was less severe. This time he could think. A dull, throbbing ache radiated from his elbow, the muscles of his upper arm and shoulder giving little involuntary jerks in response. He was sweating, hot and cold at the same time. He felt a pressure behind his eyeballs. His mouth was dry, and his stomach pinched. Maybe he had caught what Billy had.

Billy was sick. That was why he hadn't come outside with Georgie. That was why he wasn't there when something bad happened. Something bad had happened.

Georgie opened his eyes. He was in a tall, dimly-lit red and white striped tent lit with tiny yellow string lights and filled with supplies and show props, not his room. He was lying on a prickly pile of hay, not his bed. He sat up, raincoat squeaking. There had been a clown. Then pain, and darkness. Then he had seen the clown again? But he couldn't quite remember what they had talked about.

His arm. Something had happened to his arm. Georgie looked down. His arm was gone, the sleeve of his raincoat torn and ragged. He had forgotten. Disbelievingly, he poked at the angry pink and red flesh where his elbow should have been. A lightning bolt of pain shot up to his collarbone, and he bit back a whimper.

A set of yellow eyes watched the child from the top of a fifteen-foot stack of hay bales.

Georgie had to get home. He scrambled to his feet, boots rustling in the hay. Dizziness almost tipped him back to the ground headfirst. Panting, he spun in a circle. There was no exit in the tent that he could see. Shadows filled the spaces between a plinth painted with faded silver and red diamonds, a mannequin wearing a decaying pair of suspenders, a cluster of barrels, an empty cage. He smelled popcorn and cotton candy, and he could hear faint music and laughter. The show was going on elsewhere, it seemed. But there was no way out. He was trapped.

"Is something *the matter*?"

Georgie whipped around with a yelp, subconsciously cradling his injured arm to his chest.

The clown stood before him, hands on his knees and bending down so he could look into Georgie's eyes. No, not he, *It*. The clown wasn't right, wasn't normal. Its eyes too blue, Its hair too orange. He had a vague, hazy memory of speaking to the clown while he had been playing in the street, and again afterward. It had been dark, and he couldn't really remember what had been said...

"I'm hurt, real bad."

"Yesss..."

"I need –" Georgie croaked, broke off, and licked his lips. His mouth was unbearably dry. "I need to get help."

"I can help. Already did. I stopped the bleeding." The clown's ruby lips pulled back in a chipper smile. It slid a tiny telepathic tendril into Georgie's mind, calming him. Just a bit.

"Well, thanks, but I need an adult."

Its sudden caw of laughter made Georgie jerk back. "Someone older than me, you mean? Good luck with that, kid."

The lightheadedness was making it hard to think. The clown *looked* like a grown-up. "Well, a parent."

"There's nothing a parent can do for you that I can't do, Georgie."

"Where am I?"

It let out a rough giggle that reminded Georgie of a donkey. "Where does it look like, you silly goose?"

"The circus... but where is the circus?"

Its face pulled down into an exaggerated frown, white paint flaking around Its brow and mouth. "We've been over this before." It

supposed It couldn't fully blame the kid. Shock and trauma had a way of knocking memories right out of humans' ears.

"I don't remember." The dizziness had become too much. He felt hot, too hot to puzzle all this out. Georgie sat down and took off his raincoat.

"*Think.*" The clown's smiling, unblinking stare made him fidget.

"The sewer? We're in the sewer?"

"Yes."

"The whole circus?"

"Yessss."

"The wind blew it away."

It swallowed a gob of saliva. "The wind blew you away too, it seems."

"I don't... I don't remember your name."

"Pennywise. Do you remember what happened to your arm?"

Georgie's face screwed up in concentration. "An accident?"

"That's right."

That didn't seem quite right to Georgie, somehow, but he decided not to press the issue. "I don't feel good."

"Well," It tittered, "It would be *funny* if you did."

Pennywise's large head tilted to the side. The boy was no longer in imminent danger of bleeding out, but he was weak. He'd been lying in the sewer for almost twelve hours. And It could smell the fever rolling off him, taste the droplets of sweat forming on his skin and dampening his hair. Quite a bit of greywater had been sloshed into Georgie's open wound before Pennywise had cauterized it. Unsurprising that he would fall ill.

"You're hungry and thirsty, I'd imagine."

"Yes."

"Feeling a little *peaky*?"

"Maybe I'm getting what Bill has." At the thought of Bill, Georgie's hysteria began to bubble back up.

A grin split Its face. "Maybe..." It pressed a hand to Georgie's warm forehead. Another gentle pulse of influence to calm him just a bit, like a mild tranquilizer. Before his fear made both of them lose their heads. "Hmmm, you seem warm." It knelt down so It was eye level with him and pursed Its crimson lips in a dramatic pout. "I think I know what will make you feel better."

It reached behind Its back and produced a paper cup of water and a foil-wrapped hotdog. Genuine circus fare. The display unsettled Georgie. He didn't like being alone with the clown. He wanted Billy.

One of Its eyes drifted to the side. "Did you notice who we have joining us?"

Georgie turned and saw a grey goat tethered to the ground next to him.

"It's a billy goat!"

The goat bleated, and Georgie started.

"He doesn't bite." Pennywise reached around Georgie's shoulder, impossibly far, and gave the goat a solid pat on the back with Its noticeably empty hand. When Georgie whipped around, It was still kneeling in the same spot, hands full. Saliva dripped onto Its faded, frilled collar. Georgie looked back at the goat. The goat's tail wiggled and the one bright blue eye that he could see winked.

Georgie took the cup from the clown with a trembling hand and sipped. It was cold and clear. It made him feel a little better, rinsed the taste of grit and greywater from his mouth. He drained the cup and set it by his feet.

"What's his name?"

"He doesn't have one. Yet. If you like him, maybe he'll come around more. Maybe he'll need a name." Pennywise waved the hotdog. "Here. Eat up. So you get big and strong."

Nausea pinched Georgie's stomach, but he didn't want to make Pennywise upset. He sensed that would be a mistake. And It was right, he needed to eat. Georgie took the hotdog from Pennywise, maneuvering it awkwardly with one hand, and took a small bite. It was good. Warm, and with only ketchup. Just the way he liked it. He might have appreciated it under different circumstances. He nibbled slowly.

"Feeling better?" Pennywise asked, with a trace of impatience that escaped Georgie's notice. Humans were so fragile. It could have regrown a dozen arms by now.

"A little."

It touched Its knuckles to Georgie's cheek and pretended to consider. "I think I can fix this." Georgie's fear and discomfort was giving It quite the kick indeed. It had more than enough juice to help his body tackle the infection spreading through his veins.

Pennywise gripped the top of Georgie's skull with Its long, spidery fingers and flattened Its other hand against his chest, feeling the flutter of his feverish heart. Its eyes melted into a venomous yellow, Its face going slack and eerily still. It searched through Georgie's body, stamping out the invading bacteria clustered in his arm and creeping up his shoulder. Georgie felt pins and needles spread down from his head to his toes, building in intensity until his bones seemed to vibrate. Then It released him, and his ears rang with the silence. The only place the vibrating didn't seem to stop was in his brain.

"Wh – what?" The blood drained from Georgie's face and he fell back in a faint, hotdog tumbling to the hay.

That should help, at least.

---

It could have prevented Georgie's fever, made him forget about his missing arm and see a phantom limb in its place. But he would be a

lot less insistent on leaving if he thought Pennywise was the only thing keeping him from the dark, smelly sewer, if he saw It as his rescuer from hurt and cold. Keeping the boy's pain and illness at bay and the circus present was a matter of simple but constant influence. Well within Its power.

It could have given Georgie a peek of Its deadlights and put him into a permanently tranquil, agreeable state. But where would be the fun in that?

The kid needed to be gently brought to understand his situation. He was in the freezing, maze-like bowels of Derry, and the only thing keeping him alive was Pennywise.

---

A/N: I like goats.

## 13. Friend in Need

A/N: \*pounds table rhythmically\*

THE

OG

LOSERS

\*

I thought about breaking this chapter into two parts, but couldn't really find a smooth way to do it. This is about twice as long as normal. Don't get used to it.

---

*October 17th, 1988*

Georgie did a lot of sleeping. It had anticipated this. He was exhausted from the blood loss, fever, and shock. He'd woken up briefly the previous afternoon and asked for more food and drink, to which It obliged with a corndog and a soda. The child would need more nutritious fare soon, but It wanted to curry more favor before It presented him with something that had grown in the ground or on a tree. Georgie was picky and was likely to put up a fuss, even in his *precarious* situation.

Then he slept through the night, leaving It to Its own devices. The miasma of fear that hung around Georgie like a fog tempted Its appetite, and It knew better than to test Its self-control. So It snatched two toddlers from their beds while their parents went out to meet their friends for a drink. It gave a long-married wife and mother of three the first seeds of boredom with her husband, and made an old mechanic's arthritis flare up. It sent Deputy Bowers off on a drunken, half-coherent rage against his unfortunate son for dropping a carton of milk.

Georgie woke in the morning, marking a day and a half since his official disappearance. Pennywise knelt down in front of him before he had finished rubbing the sleep from his eyes. It touched his mind.

His body temperature had returned to normal, the infection gone. His arm had a bearable ache. He was hungry. It waved Its hand and a bowl of oatmeal materialized under Its palm.

"Feeling better?" It asked, even though It knew that yes, he was feeling better. Physically, at least. That was what people did, asked mundane and obvious questions.

Georgie ignored the offered breakfast and the small talk. He glanced around at the tent, gaze lingering on the goat idly sniffing at the ground. It could practically hear his little mind whirring. "How long have I been here?"

Pennywise sucked on Its buck teeth. "A little while."

"Can I go home? My parents will be looking for me soon. They'll get mad."

One blue eye drifted off-center, and It appeared to be struggling to keep Its grin in place. "Not just yet."

Georgie furrowed his brow. "To... which part?"

"Home." It almost added, *your parents are already looking for you*, but thought better of it.

His voice fell to a near whisper. "Oh... okay." He sensed the futility of arguing. Its brusque tone reminded him of his dad's 'end of discussion' moods.

"Do you like the goat?" It gave the goat's head a tickle, to which the animal offered no response.

"He's alright, I guess."

"*He.* Your boat is a she. Here." Pennywise grabbed Georgie's remaining wrist and abruptly tugged his hand to the goat's flank, dragging him a few inches across the hay. It was warm, and wiry, like his grandmother's old hairbrush. The goat swung his head around and sniffed at Georgie's hand, puffing hot air over his fingers, before returning his attention to the dirt. A smile curved Georgie's lips. When Pennywise released his wrist, he continued to scratch at

the goat's hide.

"Does he have a name?"

It shook Itself, like a dog, bells tinkling. "I said *you* could name him, *remember?*"

"Are you sure?"

Its voice dropped to almost a growl. "Yes."

Pennywise didn't like being questioned, it seemed. Georgie made a mental note of this discovery.

"Well..." He smoothed the hair on the goat's spine with long, slow strokes. He wasn't very good with naming things, and he wasn't feeling quite at the top of his game at the moment. "Is it alright if I think about it?"

The clown's smile widened, blue eyes taking on a glow and saliva wetting Its blood red lips. *Thinking about it* implied the child was going to be around for a while. Not that the kid was aware of his slip-up, or had any say in how long he spent with Pennywise anyhow. "Of course. That's *fine*."

"I never said... thanks. For helping me."

The smile dropped from Its face. It stared at Georgie, *through* Georgie, for several beats. Then It threw Its head back and laughed, loud, shrieking laughter that echoed oddly and rasped unpleasantly in Georgie's ears. Pennywise wrapped Its arms around Its middle and fell onto Its back, kicking Its feet in the air. The bells on Its suit jangled. The goat lifted his head and let out a series of screaming bleats. Georgie wasn't sure what was so funny, but he had already grown somewhat accustomed to Pennywise's outbursts of laughter.

When the clown sat up, Its orange hair hung in Its face and Its eyes were a vivid yellow. Its smile had gone sharp and angular, stretching unnaturally wide and baring teeth that were suddenly long and wickedly pointed. Its chin and jaw were wet with saliva, which It wiped at with one gloved hand.

That was something Georgie wasn't used to seeing. His eyes went wide, and he scooted back with a gasp.

Its mouth shrank down to a relatively normal-sized smirk, and It ran Its fingers through Its hair, taming it back into a tall peak. "Well," It rasped, "I suppose... I *did*." All things being equal, It *had* banished Georgie's fever. That was helping, in a way, no matter which angle you looked at it.

Georgie was still leaning away, breath quick and body tense. Pennywise ran Its tongue along Its now-blunted teeth, tasting. His fear was nice, but best to not tempt fate. Self-control wasn't Its strong suit.

It scooted the bowl of oatmeal across the ground, a few inches closer to Georgie's foot, then puckered Its lips into a crimson pout and narrowed Its baby blues in an imitation of thoughtfulness. "Want to see some magic?"

Georgie relaxed only an increment. "Uh, okay."

Pennywise reached out and pat the goat on his shoulder. The goat jerked his head from the ground so quickly that his horns nearly jabbed his back. It held one hand under the goat's chin, palm up and fingers wiggling. "Cough it up." The goat snorted and stomped, then promptly gagged up a wad of white paper into the clown's waiting hand. Georgie made a disgusted noise as Pennywise made a show of examining the slobbery mess. It pinched a folded corner and whipped the paper through the air with one sharp flick.

It offered the pristine S. S. Georgie to her namesake.

"My boat!" Fear forgotten, the kid snatched the paper toy from Its hand. He held the boat up to the light, gaping. "How did you find it? Her."

Pennywise gave a throaty giggle. "Well, she was in the goat. And who can say where he found her? He's always eating things he shouldn't."

"Bill would've killed me if I came home without her." Georgie's gaze dropped from the boat to his amputated arm. "It's... really gone. My

arm. He's gonna be mad. How will I write my name or ride a bike?" His voice pitched toward hysteria, and tears filled his eyes. "How can I be normal?"

Pennywise set a hand on Georgie's knee and gently tamped down on the tidal wave of emotions and panic rising in Georgie's mind. "Well, I'll help you. That's what friends are for, *right?* Aren't we friends?"

Georgie wasn't as hesitant to respond as he would have been sober. "Yeah. Yeah, I guess we are."

---

Eddie, Stan, and Richie all did their best. Through the fog of disbelief and fear, Bill found himself grateful for their presence, how quick they had been to come to his aid. The problem was that there wasn't much they could do. Wasn't much any of them could do. It was tempting to patrol the neighborhoods on their bikes, but an organized team of police and volunteer adults were already combing Derry and shouting Georgie's name. The boys would only get underfoot.

Billy couldn't stand the thought of leaving his home. What if Georgie came home? What if the police had an important question for him? What if his mother needed comforting while Zack Denbrough was out searching?

But remaining in the home was also unbearable. Everywhere he looked were reminders of Georgie. A stray shoe here, a wayward action figure there. Fellow mothers endlessly rotated through the door, bringing Sharon casseroles and cakes and words of encouragement. A cop checked in every few hours, reporting the same: nothing. No one had seen Georgie. Nothing of his had been found. No suspicious characters had been sighted. Not much time had passed between when Georgie left the house and when the Denbroughs had gone looking for him, so he couldn't have gotten far on his own. Whatever befell him had done so within the general vicinity of the Denbrough home. If someone had taken him into a vehicle, however, he could be very far indeed. Bill felt that if he smelled one more casserole or heard a cop report absolutely nothing again, he might throw up. Or scream. Or both.

So Bill, Eddie, Stan, and Richie settled for sitting on the front lawn in a loose semi-circle where they could all see the road. Within easy view of the comings and goings of the house, within clear shouting range should there be some development, but somewhat removed from the oppressive, stifling gloom of the somehow-empty home.

Eddie tore up handfuls of damp grass, worrying his bottom lip between his teeth, mind spinning through every possible disaster that could have befallen Georgie. He chewed his lip to keep from blurting them out. A rabid dog could have dragged him from his bike and into a ditch. He could have gone down some side road, fallen, and split his skull open. Maybe he had a random heart attack or stroke. A wandering pedophile could have tossed him into the back of a van or yanked him into his house. Bowers and his gang could have crossed paths with him. The bullies had mostly left Georgie alone because of how young he was, but Eddie could easily picture a normal pushing-around escalating into something worse, some twisted rite of passage gone wrong. Best case scenario, Georgie had somehow gotten lost, or decided to run away, and was wandering Derry alone. Easy prey for anyone with foul intentions. Eddie bit his lip harder, hard enough to taste blood.

Richie, on the other hand, was not struggling to keep any words from spilling out – for one of the few times in his life. What was there to say in a situation like this? Fuck all, that's what. The only way he knew how to deal with anything remotely serious was to yell, crack jokes, or spit insults. Yelling was the sole option out of the three that might have been remotely appropriate, or if not appropriate, natural. But Richie found he didn't have it in him. He felt deflated, like an old balloon. The lingering humidity from the day before fogged his glasses, and every few minutes he removed them and wiped the lenses on his shirt. He stared at the ground and wished he wasn't so goddamned useless.

Stan sat close to Bill. Not close enough to crowd him, but close enough to offer comfort if it was needed: a hand on the shoulder, or even a hug. Stan was no stranger to grief or shock. While his own life had been thus far trauma-free, he had attended the funerals of several of the congregation at his synagogue over the years, had held his mother as she wept over the news of her sister's sudden death (a car

accident). He knew how to sit next to someone and be there for them. Even if it meant long moments of silence, or loud sobbing, or embraces wet with snot and tears. There were times when one needed to put aside one's dislike of physical contact, emotional displays, and runny noses. Stan put a hand on Bill's shoulder and gave a gentle squeeze as he looked out to the road. Bill gave no response, and Stan did not expect or need him to. He knew Bill well enough to know he appreciated the gesture.

Bill stared out toward the road, but he saw nothing. Or, more accurately, what he saw was not what was before him. He didn't see old Mrs. Earnhart approaching the house with her lips pressed into a sympathetic line, crock pot gripped in her wrinkled hands. He didn't see the police cruiser parked in the driveway. Instead he saw Georgie, surrounded by darkness, scared and alone and possibly hurt. He saw this as clearly as if he were sitting next to his brother. It was so real, so vivid, that he had difficulty believing it was merely his imagination. He'd already spent his tears of shock and disbelief and guilt, and the full weight of his grief was still a while off. So he stared out at nothing, wide-eyed, transfixed by his vision and as emotionless as the cops who delivered nothing but an absence of any leads. He felt Stan's hand on his shoulder, and his chest gave a nearly-painful twinge of gratitude.

And the friends sat together like that in silence until the sun began to set and Sharon Denbrough emerged from the house, suggesting in a tear-rough voice that they should start heading home before their parents worried.

---

A/N: Sike. Who would've thought the first time we see the original Losers, none of them say a word, and instead sit around silently hating themselves.

In all seriousness, I'm excited to explore some fun things with these characters, and sorry for the sucky chapter title.

## 14. MISSING

A/N: I lied, this one's just as long as the previous chapter.

It's time for our favorite spooooooky mansion

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*October 18th, 1988*

"When can I go home?"

It flicked Its eyes up from the sliced carrots Georgie was idly pushing around on his plate to the boy's face, keeping Its own face in a neutral smile. Its first instinct was that this was some ploy to avoid having to clear the carrots and spinach from the paper plate It had given him mere moments before, but when It touched his mind It saw that this was not the case. Being around It had made the boy less aware of the passing of time – It had that effect on people, and being surrounded by the circus illusion didn't help. But Georgie was getting restless. He stank of dirt and greywater, he'd been in the same clothes for two days, and he missed his family. He knew he'd been down here for too long. It was probably, he thought, quite late. Maybe even the middle of the night.

"Why do you keep asking that?"

"Because I want to go home."

It cocked Its head to the side. "You aren't having fun? Down here, with *me*?"

Georgie sensed the tension crackling under the surface, saw the yellow flash where Its eyes had been blue a moment before, heard the deeper pitch to Its voice. But he pressed on. "I'm filthy, my sweater is ruined, and I've been hurt real bad. My parents need to see, they need to look at it. They'll be worried about me, they'll think I'm missing."

It always came to this, didn't it? Pennywise let out a long sigh and knelt in front of Georgie, giving the goat a pat to soften the edge. "Georgie, I'll let you know when it's time to go home..."

"No, I want to go now! You're not my dad, and I'm not supposed to be here! You're getting me in trouble! I need to go home, show them what happened to my arm –"

"There's nothing to be done about your –"

"Maybe they can do something, some kind of surgery –"

The clown's teeth, suddenly long and sharp and arranged in rows like a shark's, snapped together an inch from Georgie's face, spattering him with saliva. Its vivid yellow irises were ringed in red, Its hair hanging around Its face. Its voice was a hoarse bellow, hardly resembling anything human. "I don't care what you want, you leave when I decide you can leave, and if I'm feeling generous, it won't be as a handful of chewed-up bones."

Georgie scooted back from It, eyes wide and shining with tears. The goat was gone, the tent was gone, all there was, all around him, was thick and impenetrable darkness. And yet, somehow, he could see the clown's hellish, snarling face, could see his own grimy green boots kicking at the ground as he pushed himself backward, blindly. "You're a bad man," he whimpered, almost without knowing he spoke, recalling the warnings his mother had given him about wandering off with strangers.

"I'm worse," It hissed. Thick ropes of spit dripped from Its maw like hot candle wax. "Do you know where your arm went?"

Georgie saw a long, snakelike tongue behind Its rows of fangs, and screamed.

It pointed into Its cavernous mouth with a hand that had become a dark, monstrous claw. "It

went down my throat. I ate your arm. And it wasn't an accident. I bit it right off your shoulder."

Georgie screamed again, a high-pitched shriek of sheer terror that made It chatter Its teeth in anticipation, that sent power coursing through Its being. Its eyes rolled back in Its head. Oh he would be *delicious*.

Wait.

Its fangs retracted and Its mouth shrank to a size more befitting Its face. It glared at the sniveling, ungrateful boy cowering before him. It had not brought him down here to eat. It needed to compose Itself. It probed Georgie's mind. Confusion had kept his sanity from snapping completely. It had almost spoiled everything in one brief lapse of temper.

It stared hard at Georgie, eyes flaring crimson. His crying quieted, then stopped. It smoothed Its hair back into a neat orange peak and blinked twice, eyes going blue. It called to mind all the family squabbles It had overheard over the thousands of years It had been an inhabitant of Earth, pulling from those that had taken place in the past five years.

"There, there," Pennywise whispered, reaching out and placing Its neatly gloved hands on Georgie's shoulders. It mopped up his fear and anxiety like a sponge. No amount of sweet-talking could erase what It had said about Georgie's arm, so It wiped out that bit of their conversation Itself. The rest could remain, or the gist of it. Relationships were built on honesty, and a bit of vulnerability. Trust was a two-way street, or the appearance of one. "It's alright. I'm... I'm sorry, ok? I... lost my temper. I shouldn't have."

Georgie sniffled, wiping at his snotty nose with his hand, smearing his upper lip with mud. "Why do you want me to stay here so bad?"

It pursed Its cherry lips and ruffled Georgie's damp, oily head. "It gets... awfully lonely down here sometimes, kiddo."

"But you have the whole circus."

"No other clowns though, no other people."

"You said you brought other kids down here, sometimes."

It ran Its tongue over Its teeth, one eye briefly straying. Georgie could give Susan a run for her money. "I lied. I didn't want you to know how alone I was. I was... *embarrassed*."

"Why won't anyone come play with you?"

It snickered. "I scare them."

"You can be... a little scary. Sometimes."

It grinned. "I'll try not to be."

"Well, we're friends. So you don't have to be lonely anymore."

"I appreciate that." It stood and made a show of dusting off Its pants.

"I would like to show you something I haven't shown anyone before."

"What's that?"

"My house."

"You have a house? You don't live in the circus?"

"I don't live in the house."

"Then why do you have it?"

It tittered, eyes rolling independently, like a doll's. "It's... on my property, you might say."

"Oh. Where do you live, then?"

"My dear Georgie, I can't go spilling all my secrets at once, can I?"

Georgie had no response to this.

"Now this may feel a little *funny*," It stooped and wrapped one gloved hand around Georgie's wrist. "Why don't you count down for us? From three."

Georgie gulped audibly. "Three.."

There was a *pop* that he felt in every molecule in his body, like a balloon had burst inside his torso, and he was standing inside of a house. The kitchen, to be precise. A dusty, decrepit kitchen. Weak sunlight filtered through a paper-covered window. The table looked like it could collapse if he sneezed on it, leaves and dirt littered the tile floor, the faded floral wallpaper was peeling. A rusting refrigerator sat in the corner. Pennywise was nowhere to be seen.

Georgie hugged his arm to his body and turned in a slow circle. Vermin scuttled somewhere in the bowels of the house, and the foundations let out a few quiet groans. There were two doorways, one well-lit with midday light, and one dark, the barest hint of steps visible. A basement. Georgie shuddered. With cautious, shuffling steps, he headed through the bright doorway, into some sort of sitting room. Vines dangled from the ceiling and cobwebs softened the corners. A couch had been dragged to the center of the room; rats had chewed holes into the cushions, and the entire piece of furniture was grey with dust. The windows here, too, were covered over with paper. Some of the ceiling had fallen in, and plaster and bits of broken wood blanketed the floor.

Georgie turned and saw an entryway, spiral stairs up to the second floor, and the front door. He had just shifted his weight to take a step toward the door when he heard a loud thump. He jerked, and looked over his shoulder. A gloved hand protruded from under the couch, fingers splayed wide on the floor. As he watched, another hand emerged and slapped the floor, then Pennywise dragged Itself from under the couch. It shook the dust from Its suit with a jangle of bells and brushed Its hair back from Its eyes. The sunlight illuminated the cracks in Its thick white face paint. It made Georgie squint, looking at Its white face with the sun hitting it. And he knew it wasn't even very bright. How long had he been in the dim tent?

"I know it's not much to look at..." It pressed Its lips into a line as It pretended to survey the room. "But it's mine. It's important to take pride in what you have." It put Its hands on Its knees and bent down to Georgie's level, making an effort to keep both eyes centered on his face. "You may need a break from the circus, every once in a while."

"What about Silver?"

It blinked a few times, owlishly. "Who?"

Georgie glanced down at his feet, embarrassed. "The goat."

The clown's red mouth pulled back into a wide smile, but Its teeth remained straight and square. "So you've named him, then. That's good. I'm glad to hear it. It seems *Silver* is here to stay." It extended a hand. "Would you like the grand tour? We can stay out of the

basement, if you prefer." It winked.

"You know I don't like basements?"

"Basements in general are scary places, wouldn't you say?"

"They scare you too?"

"Oh yes, they give me the *shivers*." Pennywise shuddered violently in demonstration bells singing again. "Who *likes* basements?"

Georgie furrowed his brow, gaze drifting over to the covered window, then the door. "Will I be here a while?"

"Only for a *little while*." For what was a week, or a month, or a year, or Georgie's entire lifetime, in the scope of Its existence? Only a little while.

"Ok, well..." Georgie chewed on his lip.

"Well?" Pennywise prodded, slowly lowering Its hand.

"If I'm going to stay... I would like some clean clothes. And an actual bed, if you have one."

"Reasonable. Very reasonable, Georgie. That I can provide, and more." It offered Its hand again. "Would you like to see the house?"

After a moment more of hesitation, Georgie placed his hand in Its waiting palm. The clown's spidery fingers closed over his own.

---

Bill fought to hold his trembling bottom lip in check as he stared at the stack of posters on their kitchen table. The word "MISSING" was printed in large, bold letters above a slightly fuzzy, black and white picture of Georgie. Sharon sat at the table, cigarette in hand, staring out the window over the sink.

"Do you think..." She trailed off, cleared her throat, took a drag. She had strict rules against smoking in the house. "Do you think you could take a couple of those and put them up around town?"

"Shu – sure thing, Mom."

She took another drag, exhaled slowly. Bill grabbed a handful from the stack and rummaged up a roll of duct tape in the basement. He nearly ran into Richie when he opened the front door. Richie's fist was raised, ready to knock. Eddie and Stan hovered behind him.

"Wuh – what are you guys duh – doing here?"

Richie pushed his glasses up on his nose and looked down at his sneakers. "We wanted to come by and, uh, see how you're doing." It sounded lame and insufficient, even to his ears. *Obviously not well, fucktard.* "I mean..."

"Is there anything we can do?" Stan asked.

"I – I gotta..." Bill twitched the handful of posters. He didn't want to drag his friends into this grim task.

Eddie edged around Richie. "We can help with that. It will go four times as fast with all of us."

"You duh – don't ha – have to." Bill blinked out at the bright noon sky. "Sss – shouldn't you buh – be at sss – school?"

"We fucked off early," Richie said. "I think Mrs. Rhinehart will be relieved, honestly."

Stan cut in before Richie could shove his foot any further down his mouth. "And we want to. Help, I mean."

Bill didn't smile, couldn't, under the circumstances, but his eyes held a grateful warmth to them. "Uh – okay, then. Yeah, I'd ap – appreciate it."

The poster-hanging didn't go faster, because the group remained together in unspoken agreement, Stan and Richie and Eddie forming a protective sort of triangle around Bill as they rode their bikes down the streets of Derry.

They did not notice the tall, slender, leather-jacketed man loitering around the school grounds and smoking. Nor did they notice how

closely the man watched them tape the poster to the school's brick wall.

Rob's pale green eyes tracked the boys' progress down the block and around a corner. The short one smelled especially nice, already afraid of meeting the same fate as Georgie – presumably a gruesome death. Its lips curved into a smile around the cigarette. It sensed Georgie approaching one of the windows of the Neibolt house a little too closely, and abruptly disappeared in a gust of wind.

---

Georgie would grow restless soon, which in turn would grow tiresome. Quickly. It decided It would exert a little more influence, induce a little more forgetfulness. Georgie wouldn't notice his missing arm so much, and time would be harder to track. The family was more complicated. It couldn't make Georgie forget about them without risking his mind cracking like glass under pressure. That forgetting would proceed along well enough, just from Its presence.

While Georgie cooed over a nest of rat pups in the rotting mattress shoved into the corner of the nursery one room over, It twirled Its wrist through the air in a flourish and held a rain-spotted, slightly wrinkled poster in front of Its face. The paper proclaimed that George "Georgie" Denbrough, aged seven, height three feet and ten inches, weight forty-five pounds, hair and eyes brown, was missing. Last seen walking along Witcham Street, wearing green rain boots, jeans, a yellow raincoat, and a striped sweater underneath. Please report any sightings or tips to the Derry police. Georgie's toothy smile beamed back at It in black and white. Pennywise sniffed at the paper, round red nose twitching. Grief, frustration, fear.

It flung the poster at the peeling wall, where it stuck as if pressed there by a strong wind. Another for the collection.

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A/N: Hopefully I got the layout of the house ok. I tried my best.

As always, thank you for your patience with me and this fic. Reviews make my day.

## 15. Bathtime

A/N: Cute or creepy? You be the judge.

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*October 18th, 1988*

After hanging the final poster on a lamp post at the park, Bill felt an abrupt need to be alone. It must have shown on his face, because not even Richie objected when he thanked his friends and excused himself to bike home.

Stan, Eddie, and Richie waited to give Bill a five minute head-start, then headed for his house, only satisfied to go their own ways when they had confirmed his bike was propped on the porch by the front door.

Zack and Sharon were talking in low voices in their bedroom, and did not seem to notice Bill enter the house. It was around dinner time, and he should have been hungry; he had eaten very little all day. But Bill found he didn't much want to eat. He didn't much want to do anything, really. Of their own accord, his feet shuffled upstairs and to Georgie's closed bedroom door. He stared at the doorknob for a long moment, overwhelmed with the sensation that he was intruding. He swallowed, blinked his burning eyes, and turned the knob.

Everything was exactly as Georgie had left it, except that his bedside light had been turned off. His bed was unmade, his closet open. A few toys and several pieces of clothing littered the floor. Bill stepped over the threshold, turned, and slowly closed the door, as quietly as possible. A pall fell over the room, as if his ears were plugged. His own breathing sounded raspy in his ears. He crept over to Georgie's bed and silently lowered himself onto it. He sat and watched the door, inhaling Georgie's now-stale smell, a smell that was all little boy but uniquely Georgie, afraid to make a sound. He was, absurdly, afraid that if he made any noise, whatever got Georgie would get him. He knew it was irrational, but he couldn't shake that subconscious, instinctual fear, the fear the gazelle feels when it wakes in the night and knows the lion is close. Perhaps that was what Georgie had felt. Perhaps that was what he was feeling, right at that

moment.

Bill's burning eyes brimmed over. With only the slightest creaking of mattress springs, he lifted his legs onto the bed and stretched out. A deep, grief-filled wail swelled at the back of his throat, but he kept it in. He didn't want to bring his parents investigating. He bit down on his bottom lip hard enough to draw blood and let out quiet, gasping sobs as the tears ran from his eyes and back into his hairline.

"I'm s-s-sorry, Georgie," he whispered. It was his fault; he should have gone with Georgie or convinced him to stay inside, or told him to stay close. It had been three days now with no sign, God knew what had happened to his brother or where he was (or where his body was). Bill shook that thought away. He owed it to Georgie to not give up on him, to assume he was still alive. He very well could be. He could be wandering the woods (would he have died of cold?). He could be captive somewhere (would it be better to be dead than in the grips of some pervert?). Bill rolled onto his side, grabbed one of Georgie's pillows, and curled around it, muffling his cries.

Under the bed, Pennywise rolled Its glowing yellow irises upward and drummed Its fingers silently on the floor. Normally It would have lapped up Bill's misery with a happy grin, but It had things to do. It sensed he didn't plan to leave any time soon. It listened to Bill's quiet weeping for another minute more, then decided it was time to get Bill moving. It sent a small pair of feet trotting down the stairs, along with a childish giggle.

Bill shot to his feet. "Juh-Georgie!?" He ripped the bedroom door open and stood at the top of the stairs, searching, listening. His shoulders slumped. He glanced back at Georgie's room, rubbed the tears from his face with the back of his hand, and walked over to close the door.

The moment the latch clicked home, It slithered from under Georgie's bed. As Bill's footsteps padded into his room, It snatched a pair of pajamas from the floor, then a shirt. The weather was cool, and the boy would have to stay warm – It had spent enough time around kids to know what they wore. It found a pair of jeans on the end of the bed. It opened Georgie's dresser and dug through the drawers, pulling out socks and underwear and a sweater.

Bill stood by his desk, breathing coming fast. It sounded like someone was rummaging through Georgie's stuff. He could still hear his parents talking in *their* room. Which meant there was someone in Georgie's room, or he was going crazy. Considering the footsteps and laughing he had just heard, the latter seemed more likely.

It knew Bill could hear It, and It didn't particularly care. The faint wisp of fear was nice. It grabbed a pair of sneakers from the bottom of the closet – rain boots were restrictive and not very insulated – and a thick blanket from the top shelf. It swept everything into a small bundle and wrapped Its arms around it.

Bill braced himself, marched to Georgie's room, and flung the door open so quickly it bounced off the wall. Empty. "Wh-what the h-h-hell..." In the bathroom, something fell into the tub with a loud bang. Bill bolted into the bathroom and slapped on the light. Nothing. He squinted. He could have sworn he left a towel hanging over the towel rack this morning.

Sharon came up behind him and placed a hand on his shoulder, pulling away when he started violently. "Is everything alright? I heard a noise." She searched his face. "Have you been crying?"

"I'm fuh-fine." He shouldered past her and half-ran down the stairs. He needed air.

---

"Did you find a room for Silver?"

Georgie paused in his painstaking task of tugging a mattress into the opposite corner of the room with one arm. "Uh-huh!"

Pennywise put Its hands on Its hips and surveyed the scene from just outside the room. Georgie had piled various debris – a broken chair, hunks of drywall, half of a closet door, and two sagging cardboard boxes – in front of the doorway in a haphazard barrier. He was currently engaged in wrestling a moldy, rodent-chewed mattress into a corner, presumably to make a bed for Silver, who stood in the middle of the room and idly stared at the wall. It had found that it was easy enough to keep the goat illusion going; Georgie had never spent time around goats and had no expectation for how Silver

should behave, and he was giving off more than enough subconscious unease to keep such a simple trick powered. He wouldn't notice if Silver was unnaturally stoic.

Its round red nose twitched. It had half-expected Georgie to be too preoccupied with his own predicament to bother with the goat. Interesting. It easily stepped over the short wall of junk. "Georgie, I have some things for you."

Georgie dropped the mattress with a thump, raising a cloud of dust. "What?"

"Come and see." It stepped back out of the room, and Georgie followed, half-collapsing his barrier. Pennywise waved a hand. "Don't worry about that. Silver will behave himself." Easy enough, since the goat disappeared the moment he was out of Georgie's sight.

It led Georgie to the sunroom off the main landing and bowed with a flourish of Its hand and a wide grin that split Its face. "I have retrieved your pajamas, and the necessary *tools* for a bath. As requested." It remained bent at the waist, saliva dripping to the dusty floor, cobalt eyes tracking Georgie as he sifted through the pile of clothes. He lifted a bottle of liquid soap; It had known his favorite soap and favorite pajamas without having to ask.

"I actually *want* a bath," Georgie muttered.

Pennywise giggled. "Let's not waste any more... *time*, then."

Georgie stood and shook the dust from a handful of clothing. "No offense, but your bathroom probably isn't very clean."

Straightening, It wrinkled Its nose and gave him an exaggerated frown, feigning offense.

Georgie backpedaled. "That's ok, I'm sure it's not... too bad."

The bathroom was worse than Georgie had imagined. There was a hole in the wall, in which some mammal had made a nest decades past. The tile floor was cracking. A corner had been smashed off the porcelain sink, which held several old syringes. The mirror over the sink was spiderwebbed where something had hit it. A wall of leaves

and dead vines covered the small window over the bathtub, blocking out almost all light. The shower curtain was missing. All towels, washcloths, and toiletries had long since been looted (which It was aware of, and had prepared for). Every metal surface – the drains and faucets and towel rack – were spotted with rust. Dirt, leaves, cigarette butts, and more needles littered the belly of the bathtub.

Georgie turned in a slow circle, taking it all in, then craned his head back to look up at Pennywise, looming in the doorway, a tall pale ghost watching him from under Its brows, unsmiling, studious. He said, gravely, "This is pretty bad." He walked over to peer into the tub. "Do you ever clean?"

It seemed to grow more serious. "*Nnnno.*"

"Who made this mess?"

"Drifters, people who come and go." It cocked Its head with a small smile. "They go more than they come."

"Strangers?"

"You could say *that*." It popped the *t* loudly, crunching a syringe under one of Its boots as It stepped into the bathroom.

"Strangers just walk into your house? Why are there needles in here?"

"Heroin, Georgie." It patted the boy on his filthy head, and Its glove came away dirty.

He wrinkled his nose. "Why do people do that sort of thing?"

The clown's smile grew and It did not offer an answer. Blinking wide blue eyes, It grinned at the mess in the tub for several seconds before giving a lazy wave of Its hand. Leaves fluttered out of the tub and syringes and cigarettes went bouncing across the floor. It chuckled.

Georgie staggered back in surprise. "Wow." The display was yet another reminder in a list of many that the clown was anything but normal, anything but human, anything but safe. He cleared his throat awkwardly and began kicking debris out of the bathroom and into the hallway, then through the railing and to the first floor below.

Pennywise flicked Its hand again, sending a small whirlwind of dirt and leaves billowing out of the bathroom and into empty space off the landing.

Pennywise and Georgie (though mostly Pennywise) had the bathroom cleared out in short order. It removed the overgrowth from the small window so some light could filter in through the dirty, cracked glass. Although water had long since stopped flowing through the pipes, It conjured up warm water to fill the tub. It left Georgie with soap, a towel, a washcloth, and his pajamas, and shut the door (as well as It could, with only one hinge attached) to give him some semblance of privacy.

It waited in the hallway outside the door until It heard Georgie swishing around in the tub, felt his wave of contentment and relief. It sensed he would be a while. The Disease of Derry licked Its painted lips. Fine by It. It was getting a little hungry, a little restless.

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A/N: Reviews make my day

## 16. Intruders

A/N: This is the longest chapter yet. Consider it a Labor Day weekend gift. I have some projects I am working on and I have sworn to myself to update my other fics at least once before returning to this. It might be a couple weeks before this gets another update. So I figured it wouldn't be a bad thing to give ya'll basically two chapters in one.

Also might be one of the more miserable chapters in a while.

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*October 19, 1988*

"Do ya think..." Richie sniffed and shoved his glasses up on his nose.  
"Do ya think Henry and his lapdogs had anything to do with it?"

"Don't be ridiculous," Stan tried to scoff, but it stuck in his throat.  
"They wouldn't go that far." He chucked a pebble out toward the stream with too much force, and it plopped flatly into the water. They had taken Bill out here to try and get his mind off things, at least for a little while. Richie sure hadn't waited long to shatter that fragile peace. "They pretty much lef – *leave* Georgie alone, anyway." He glanced over at Bill, who was sitting cross-legged on the ground and staring out into the water, turning a stick over and over in his fingers, picking at the bark.

"Maybe they decided it was time for a little initiation," Eddie chimed in.

Stan rolled his eyes with a sigh.

"Maybe they got a little carried away," Eddie continued, "And things just... got out of hand."

"So what are you saying?" Stan rounded on him. "That they killed a little kid and hid the body somewhere? They're dickheads but they're not –"

"Not what?" Richie interrupted. "Murderers? I don't know about you, but I think good ole Henry is one bad day away from going full Jason

Vorhees on the school, while we're on a field trip if we're lucky."

"Shoving you in a locker is a little different than homicide, Richie."

"Why are you defending him?"

"I'm not defending him, I just think you two are being retarded."

"Like Eddie said, maybe they didn't mean to and there was an accident."

"And they just hid a body?"

"Rather than go to prison or have Henry's dad kill them himself? Yeah I can believe it."

Shaking his head, Stan turned to Eddie. "You buy this bullshit?"

Eddie shrugged. "I mean, it's not impossible."

Richie wasn't done arguing his case. "Why do you think they haven't found Georgie's body yet? Someone *hid* it!"

Eddie and Stan both flinched.

Richie pinched his lips together tightly and looked at Bill's still back. "I mean, he could still be out there... probably is... still out there. But we have to consider all possibilities. Right?"

All three looked to Bill and waited. After another moment, he stood and tossed the stick into the creek with a lazy frisbee toss. He faced them, jaw tight and shoulders squared.

"Wuh-we have t-t-to rule it uh-out."

Stan shoved his hands into his hair. "This is crazy."

"Yuh-you d-don't have to cuh-come."

"No. No, I'll come with you."

"Eh-eddie?"

Eddie kicked at the dirt and rubbed the back of his neck. "I'll go, but you better make damn sure we don't get caught."

Richie put on his godawful British accent, a lame attempt to ease the tension. "So what's the plan, gov'nah?"

"Beep beep, Richie," Stan and Eddie said in unison.

Bill squinted at the late afternoon sun. "We wait fuh-for n-n-night."

Eddie muttered, "Shit."

---

It spent the day hunting, stalking, and stealing three children – one on the way to school, one playing hooky, and one on the way home. It persuaded a woman to set her apartment complex on fire, and took four bodies from the wreckage. Everything went into Its "pantry," cast up to float near the ceiling of Its lair, and from each child was taken some small token to be added to Its pile of junk.

Georgie had spent the chilly night curled up on Silver's bed and taking in his body heat. In the morning, he had made cleaning out one of the upstairs bedrooms for himself his day's project. He shoved his clothing into a tilting dresser that was missing one of its drawers and kicked the dead foliage and debris littering the floor into a corner. He located a mattress that wasn't falling apart and dragged it across the hallway with his one arm, a long chore in itself. No pillows or acceptable blankets to be found, he'd have to ask the clown.

As Georgie was double-checking the rooms of the house for something that could pass as a blanket (everything except the basement, of course), he entered the parlor and passed through a strip of afternoon sunlight that momentarily dazzled him. He flinched back, raising his hand to his face. A corner of the butcher's paper covering one of the windows had fallen back, allowing the afternoon sun to blaze through the glass. Suddenly aware of how dirty and cold he was, Georgie slowly approached the window. He wasn't tall enough to peek out. He shoved the rotting floral couch across the floor, its feet screeching on the wooden boards loud enough to raise the hair on the back of his neck, and he almost expected Pennywise to be summoned by the noise. His sneakered feet raised clouds of

dust when he hopped onto the couch. If Georgie perched on tiptoe, he could just press his eye to the smudged glass.

He saw a dry, skeletal tree and tall dead grass. Beyond that, a leaning wrought-iron fence and the street. As he watched, a pair of ravens swooped past, cawing to each other. Georgie blinked. He felt foggy, slow, like someone was asking him questions as he awoke from sleep. He looked down at the loosely hanging sleeve of his sweater. His face scrunched in thought. His parents would be looking for him. He wasn't supposed to be here. Where was he supposed to be? What had happened?

The longer he stood at the window, the more easily he thought; the sun was a clarifier, a balm. He had been playing in the street... something had happened... and he had ended up with the clown in Its magical circus. Or backstage, more like. And the clown wouldn't let him leave to go back to Billy and his parents. It seemed like Pennywise was lonely and didn't know it yet. It was also dangerous.

Georgie's breath came a little quicker. He wasn't safe. This was a bad place to be. What had he been thinking? He jumped down from the couch and trotted to the front door. He grabbed the doorknob and tried to twist it. It was stiff. He threw all his weight forward and back, yanking on the door in a panic.

A loud *pop* sounded behind him. Georgie spun and pressed his spine against the door with a yelp.

Pennywise knelt down. "Whatcha doin, Georgie?"

Georgie didn't answer.

One of Its blue eyes remained on the boy, the other rolled up to examine the front door. "Hmmmm. Were ya trying to *sneak out*?"

'Sneak' wouldn't have been quite the word Georgie would have chosen. He clenched his hand until his ragged fingernails bit into his palm. Its eyes roamed around in different directions, searching for the catalyst. It found the peeled-back corner of butcher's paper on the window. With a flick of Its finger, the paper sealed itself back.

"You seem a little... *nervous*."

Georgie bit his lip.

"I'm not mad." It smiled at him, even giving Its eyes a believable little squint. And truthfully, It wasn't. It was only natural for the kid to feel the pull of his world. But that didn't mean he would tolerate it. Pennywise knelt in front of Georgie. "I'd like to show you something." It grinned wider, but not unnaturally so. Behind Its still-dull, asymmetrical teeth, a faint glow crawled up Its throat.

Georgie's eyes went wide and glassy, his face slack. It allowed him only this brief and indirect peek before closing Its ruby lips. The boy swayed as if he might fall, but he remained standing.

It wagged a gloved finger in Georgie's face, hairless brows pulled down sternly. "You are not to leave the house. You are not to *think* about leaving the house. Understand?"

Georgie responded with a slow-as-molasses nod.

"Good." Pennywise stood, brushing off Its knees.

"I want a pillow," Georgie mumbled.

It cocked Its head. "What?"

"I want a pillow," he repeated, a little louder. "And a blanket. A thick one, so I don't get cold."

Its white paint on Its cheeks cracked with the strength of Its smile, and a whooping laugh burst from Its mouth. The clown wrapped Its arms around Its stomach and bent over, laughing until spit flecked the floor. After a long moment It rose back up, wiping saliva from Its chin. "Well, I suppose that's not..." Its eyes scanned the dusty, crumbling interior of the house. "Unreasonable."

Georgie still swayed in front of It, staring at nothing. The effects would wear off soon. It patted his head.

"I can do that for you. Sure."

---

"This is crazy."

"Shut up, Stan."

"We're going to get caught. And either Henry will kill us, or his dad will arrest us and my mom will kill us."

"Not you too, Eds."

"Well at least your parents don't give a shit if you –"

"All of you, be quiet," Bill cut in. It was already difficult enough to bike down the dirt road in the dark without falling, and the group's chatter wasn't helping. They obeyed immediately.

The moon was round and full, just bright enough that the boys could see the difference between the road and the ditch. They'd all brought flashlights but had decided to save them until they got to the Bowers property. They didn't want to be spotted approaching the house. Richie had also tucked a small pocketknife into his waistband, which Eddie had thrown a small fit over.

They arrived at the house. Dropping their bikes on the grass next to the mailbox, they crouched behind Officer Bowers's squad car. Henry's shiny red convertible was parked in front of it. One downstairs window in the house was lit with the flickering ambiance of a television screen, but the curtains were pulled shut at least.

"So what exactly are we looking for?" Stan asked.

"Henry wouldn't bury a body by his house," Eddie added.

Bill hadn't thought this far ahead. "Anything suspicious, I guess."

"The shed?" Richie suggested.

"It's as good a place as any to start," Bill said. He rose to peek over the top of the squad car, confirmed the house remained still, and began to move toward the dark, squatting shadow of the Bowers' small and rundown shed, ducked low.

Richie followed without hesitation, but Stan and Eddie remained.

Stan twisted his flashlight in his hands.

"You can't see where you're going! What if you step on a snake or something?" Eddie hissed. The sound of a door slamming carried faintly from the house, and Eddie flattened himself on the gravel drive. A light came on upstairs.

Richie turned and beckoned. "Get your asses over here!"

Eddie and Stan didn't move.

"Where do you think they would find you? Over here in the bushes or right in the middle of their fucking driveway?"

Stan trotted over to Richie and Eddie followed, scurrying on all fours.

"I can't believe I agreed to this," Eddie said.

Richie thumped him on the back. "Admit it, you're loving this."

"No I definitely am not!"

"Guys, cut it out." Bill approached the shed cautiously, hand outstretch and feet rustling through the tall grass and weeds growing up against the side of the structure. He felt along the side of the weathered wood for a door.

"Didn't we bring flashlight for this?" Richie waved his own near Bill's face.

Bill glanced at the house with its two lit windows. "Not yet..." No door on this side. He bit his lip and shuffled around the corner of the shed.

"I swear to God, if one of them comes outside or so much as peeks out of the window, I am ditching you guys," Eddie said.

"They won't come outside." Stan sounded less than confident.

Bill's fingers felt a hinge. He ran his palm sideways and found a latch. "Guys, I got it!" He flipped the latch and gave the door an experimental tug. The hinges groaned softly, and the door caught in

the thick grass before it had opened half an inch.

Richie let out a high, nervous giggle. "I can't see shit, but that sounds spooky."

"Can it, Richie," Eddie snapped.

The shed was between them and the house. Bill peeked around the shed again. The same lights were on, no sign that they had been heard. "Ok, flashlights on, but be careful. Keep them pointed down." Four beams of light clicked into existence. Bill directed his light at the shed door. "We're going to have to tear this stuff up so we can open the door." Stan and Richie moved to help.

"I'll just, uh, stand watch," Eddie said. He held the lens of his flashlight against his belly and craned his neck to check on the house.

Bill began tearing up handfuls of grass, and Stan followed suit.

Richie panned his flashlight beam over the weeds. "We're supposed to clear all this out with our bare hands?"

"We just have to get rid of enough to move the door," Stan replied. He sucked air through his teeth and shook his hand. "Careful, some of this dry stuff is kind of sharp."

Shrugging, Richie knelt to join them. They had a few inches of grass ripped up in short order. As he stood, Bill brushed his stained hand on his shorts. Eddie came to hover nearby. Bill grabbed the door and yanked, dragging the door across the torn-off grass with short, hard jerks. Eddie hopped up and down in a nervous frenzy. The group crowded together while Bill shone his light within.

"What is it?" Richie asked. Stan pressed up beside him.

"Let me see! Let me see!" Eddie tried to shoulder his way past the two. Richie made room.

Bill's light moved over a small mountain of clutter. Crates, cardboard boxes, rusting tools and equipment. Cobwebs covered every surface like a shroud. A rat scurried into the recesses of the shed with a thump and a scurry of claws. Dust motes danced in the air.

Eddie shuddered. "This air is filthy. We should have brought masks or something. Maybe we should come back –"

"Stop being a pussy," Richie snapped, unusually sharp. He was scared, too. This didn't comfort Eddie at all.

Stan wrinkled his nose. "Just smells like dust and old stuff. Doesn't look like anyone's been here in ages."

Bill examined the tools more closely. They were all strung together with cobwebs and coated with a thin lining of dust. None of them had been moved in weeks. None of the boxes or crates looked like they had been moved, either. But the tall grass in front of the shed door could have told him that. He had been desperate, grabbing at straws. *Was* desperate. He turned, flashlight beam cutting across his friends' faces and making them recoil. "Maybe wuh-we sh-should chuh-chuh-check –"

"What the fuck are you faggots doing here?" Henry's voice broke over their hushed whispering like a thunderclap.

Eddie yelped and jumped back into Richie and Stan, who in turn backed into Bill and crammed themselves into the shed in their haste to put distance between themselves and the bully. Henry's scowling face appeared in the brightly-lit shed doorway. He was wearing a wifebeater and an unfastened pair of jeans – pulled on in haste when he noticed he had visitors. He was barefoot. He squinted in the combined force of all four flashlights, but this did nothing to diminish his threatening demeanor. The boys had efficiently cornered themselves on Henry's turf.

"I'll ask you again," Henry hissed. "What the hell are you doing here?"

Bill swallowed audibly, flashlight quivering ever so slightly. "Duh-did y-you hurt-t Juh-juh-Georgie?" His stutter was so strong that he was barely understandable.

"What?"

"Did you hurt Georgie, you creepy asshole?!" Richie hollered.

"Is that why you're here, digging through my stuff?"

"Answer the question!" Eddie barked.

"No, I didn't lay a hand on your nerdy little brother," Henry said. It lacked venom. He'd heard about the case from his father. No sign of the kid, and Officer Bowers suspected he'd been abducted and taken elsewhere by "some goddam pervert," and wouldn't be seen again, unless hikers or hunters stumbled across his bones in a few years. Henry looked at the boys in front of him, huddled together in his pop's dusty-ass shed, scared and angry and determined, looking for answers no matter how awful they were. He swiped at his nose with a sniff. "Get your asses off my property."

The boys remained clustered together, flashlights pointed out the doorway, until they heard the front door of the house bang shut.

"Jesus Christ," Eddie breathed out.

"Let's get the hell out of here." Stan marched out of the shed. Eddie followed.

"Wuh-wait, we n-n-need to-to..." Bill trailed off, flashlight drooping to point at the ground.

With firm assurance, Stan said, "Henry didn't do anything to Georgie, Bill."

"How do you know?" Richie challenged.

"This may be a small town, Rich, but the cop's high school son didn't commit murder."

"Let alone well enough no one's found out yet," Eddie muttered under his breath. His eyes flicked up briefly. "Sorry, Bill."

"No, yuh-you're right." Bill sighed and rubbed his face. "Let's go, b-b-before he chuh-changes his mind and guh-guh-gets his dad."

"Yes, good, come on, let's go." Eddie hopped on his toes.

Richie pushed the door shut with a *clank* behind them. They biked home in the dark, to nothing but the sounds of their spokes and their own breathing. They parted with simple, token *goodnight's*. None of

them slept easily.

---

What Pennywise had told Georgie about the squatters stuck firmly in his mind. The idea was so odd to him, that someone would just be fine with complete strangers coming into their home and making a mess of things. Then again, Pennywise hadn't seemed to mind when he kicked all of the mess out of the bathroom – had joined in, in fact. Nor had It seemed to mind when he set up a room for Silver. Were he and Pennywise strangers, though? No, they were friends. Or at least *not* strangers.

So Georgie was startled, but not terribly surprised, when he was woken by several voices outside, followed by a loud *bang*. He lay on his mattress, duvet bunched up around his chin, and held his breath. His heart hammered in his joints and throat. *Please go away, please go away.* There were some loud curses, then another *bang*. They were trying to get through the front door, it sounded like. Georgie pulled the duvet over his head. He heard wood splintering, then the front door opened so abruptly that it hit the wall.

"Jesus, it's cold."

"There's a fireplace in here, we can burn some of this old junk."

"You got a light?"

"Don't you think someone might see the smoke, you idiots?"

Three of them, one a woman. Georgie bit his lip.

He had to get Silver. To keep the goat quiet, or to protect him, or be protected by him, or some combination of the three. Georgie threw the duvet back, gooseflesh breaking out as the cold air hit his skin. He trotted to Silver's room on his sock-clad feet, cotton rustling several leaves.

"Did you hear that?"

"It's the wind."

"Nah, I heard footsteps."

The girl let out a racking cough. "One of you go check it out, then."

George hopped over Silver's barrier as quietly as he could. The goat was standing in the center of the room, ears flicking. He threw his arm around Silver's neck. "Come on," he hissed, tugging Silver toward the closet. Silver obeyed, although with less urgency than Georgie would have liked.

Two sets of footprints thumped up the stairs. Georgie crammed himself into the closet next to Silver, arm encircling his body. The closet door had fallen off its hinges long ago. The two men searched the upstairs rooms wordlessly and quickly, shoving furniture aside and kicking trash. They were well-accustomed to chasing others out of a good squatting hole. The footsteps arrived at his makeshift bedroom.

"Someone's been sleeping here. Recently."

Georgie bit back a whimper and tightened his hold on Silver.

The footsteps arrived at Silver's room.

"The hell is this?" Someone kicked Georgie's little barrier down with one blow.

The two men stood before him. They were skinny, dirty, unkempt. One had a bloody strip of cloth wrapped around his head, and the other had a long and scraggly beard.

"A kid?"

"The fuck's a kid doing in here?"

"Maybe someone left him."

The one with the beard knelt in front of Georgie. He smiled, exposing a mouthful of rotting teeth. He made Georgie's hair stand on end. "Why don't you come on out, huh buddy?" He reached for Georgie, who flinched back. The man frowned.

"What did you find up there?" the woman asked.

The one with the bandage turned and yelled, "A kid!"

The woman began to ascend the stairs.

"Come out, kid." Beard grabbed Georgie and roughly dragged him out of the closet. "Holy shit, he's missing an arm." Beard laughed in disbelief.

Bandage turned. "What?"

"He's got one arm."

Georgie tried to twist free, but Beard had Georgie's bicep in a wiry vice grip. Georgie stomped at his toes.

The woman stepped into the room. She had thin, greasy, blonde hair up in a ponytail and sores on her face. The stained, pink, puffy jacket she wore rustled when she swung her arms. "What are you doing?"

"I think the kid would like to have some fun with us. I think he could use it, don't you?"

The woman curled her lip.

"Hey, kid." Beard gave Georgie a shake. "You ever snort pixie stix? Think you'd want to try the big boy stuff?"

The woman huffed, "Whatever," and retreated downstairs. Bandage continued to watch Beard with dumb curiosity.

"We can show you how to be big boys." Beard grabbed Georgie's hair.

Georgie screamed.

---

Pennywise was sweet-talking a teenage girl into jabbing a shard from her broken bathroom mirror into her forearm when It detected a *disturbance*. From 29 Neibolt House, specifically. It crawled from the shadows in the corner of the mostly-collapsed nursery and heard a child's shriek.

It skittered down the hallway on black insectoid legs and propelled

Itself into Silver's room, clawing chunks of wood from the doorframe. It took Bandage's slack-faced head off with one clean swipe. His skull bounced off the wall with a meaty thud and rolled across the floor, leaving a swath of arterial blood marking its path. Beard had enough time to turn and release a scream of his own before It opened Its maw and engulfed his upper body, cleaving him in two. It swallowed, Its throat crunching bone.

"What the hell is going on up there?" The woman ran up the stairs, taking two at a time. It was waiting; before she had time to comprehend the scene in the bedroom, It had plunged one of Its chitinous legs through her abdomen. With a low, bubbling groan, she dropped to the ground.

Georgie looked at the head on the floor, the intestines spilling from Beard's torso, the woman still struggling to breathe in the hallway. He looked because he was more afraid of looking at the dark, chittering, spidery monster in front of him than the gore. Slowly, he lifted his hand and covered his face. He didn't have to look at either.

He sounded soft and far away. "Is that you, Pennywise?"

There was a chattering of mandibles, a hollow clicking, a rustling. Then the clown's rough, uneven voice. "Yesss."

He took in a quavery inhale and let out a trembling exhale. A tear leaked out from beneath his fingers. "Thanks."

He could hear the smile in Its voice. "You're very *welcome*."

Another shaky breath. "I would like to go back to my room."

"Say no more."

Long-fingered, humanlike hands hooked under Georgie's armpits and lifted him. He wasn't pressed to a torso; his legs dangled freely. He kept his hand over his eyes.

"Is Silver ok?"

"He'll be *just* fine."

Its crab legs hit the floor like axe chops as it carried Georgie away

from the grisly scene and into his own room. It set Georgie next to his bed. Lids still squeezed shut, he knelt down onto the mattress and threw the blanket over his head. Only then did he open his eyes, in total darkness.

"Sleep *tiiiiight*." This last word nearly a hiss, with a popped *t*. It wouldn't wipe Georgie's mind; this was Its nature, what It was, a creature of violence. It was kill or be killed, for cosmic beings as well as the lowest of Earth's organisms, and best the boy understand that. But It did bend and press a single finger to the lump under the duvet, sending a surge of melatonin to Georgie's brain.

Georgie did not hear It leave. He did have time to wonder, right before he fell asleep, why none of the squatters had seemed to see Silver.

---

A/N: Hope you enjoyed. Don't fear (or get your hopes up), Henry is not going to be a protagonist.

Every review/comment/kudo tickles me pink.

## 17. Routines and Rituals

A/N: Thank you for your patience as I took my sweet time getting around to this.

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*November 2nd, 1988*

The days passed in an agonizing crawl for Bill, in a blurred rush for Georgie.

Bill's existence had slowed to a drag. He woke tired every morning, unrefreshed. He spent his days biking around Derry, replacing any of Georgie's posters that had ripped or blown away or been washed out by rain, checking all of their old haunts with a frantic ritualism. He patrolled the quarry, the creek, the edges of the woods every day, sometimes more than once. Only once he began to grow so hungry that his head buzzed would he return home to robotically shove food into his mouth. Then he would sit in Georgie's room, staring at the wall, until his friends came and tried their best to cheer him up for a few hours. Sharon spent most of the day in bed. Zack had returned to work a week after Georgie's disappearance; the family could not afford to be without income, and he had always been one to cope with grief by pretending it wasn't there. Upon coming home, Zack would make sandwiches for the family and they would eat in near-complete silence.

Occasionally one of Bill's parents would throw a wrench in this miserable pattern. Sometimes Zack would take Bill out for dinner, or Sharon would make Bill help her in the yard. Bill found these instances disturbing. It wasn't right that they should be trying to enjoy themselves while Georgie was still missing.

---

Georgie, on the other hand, was finding it hard to *not* forget. He could hardly remember what he did from one day to the next. He knew he spent a lot of time sleeping, and he knew that he had developed a habit of zoning out. He wasn't sure for how long he would drift off, gazing at a papered-over window or Silver absently chewing or a peeling wall, but he got the sense that sometimes it

would be for quite a while. Pennywise brought him some of his toys to play with, and occasionally put on a magic show. And true to Georgie's word, he didn't once consider walking out of 29 Neibolt.

Pennywise mostly kept Georgie in the house; it was growing too cold for him to be down in the sewers, and there wasn't much for him to do there anyway. But on a few occasions, It took Georgie to the circus, It's circus down underground. About half of what Georgie thought he saw wasn't even physical illusions and was completely in his own mind, but he didn't know the difference. Did It really manifest a massive, tar-black elephant in Its lair to stand on a chair and raise a gymnast over its head? Or an explosion of red, orange, and yellow fireworks that echoed off the cement walls and through the tunnels like a barrage of gunshots? Didn't matter, as long as Georgie thought he saw it.

Another drifter stumbled into Neibolt to find some privacy to shoot up away from the damp cold, and this time It dispatched the trespasser while Georgie was busy in one of Its circuses. Rumors began to spread among the squatters and the crackheads, whispers that a ghost haunted 29 Neibolt, that it was now inhabited by a serial killer. This was fortuitous, as Pennywise kept Georgie in the house increasingly often as the weather cooled. Its powers might have been great, but keeping a human boy warm in the wet, freezing sewers as Maine winter approached was a pointless challenge.

Maintaining a constant eye on the house and holding all the different illusions and influences necessary to keep Georgie complacent and not-hypothermic was draining. Its appetite was stronger than usual, and It killed at almost double Its customary rate. It was enough to rouse the apathetic Derry police force into something akin to alarm, and there were murmurs of getting federal agents involved. Disappearances in the double digits within a few weeks was notable, even for Derry. These murmurs, however, had a way of never resulting in any action.

---

Georgie sat on the grimy floor close to the small heap of broken furniture and splintering boards crackling in the fireplace. A cold sleet hammered on the house, leaked through holes in the roof to puddle in the attic, and dripped through the certain points of the

ceiling. Even with the warmth of the fire, he was wearing double layers and keeping his hand fisted into his opposite armpit. Pennywise came up behind him with tinkling, creaking steps. It tossed a moth-eaten, dusty blanket around his shoulders. He tucked his legs to his chest, snuffled, and rested his head on his knees without his customary thanks, as reluctant and timid as it sometimes was.

One of Its eyes rolled to the side. "Is *ssssomething* wrong?"

"Just cold," Georgie mumbled.

Its face twisted in a frown that was almost grotesque. Did the child think It was stupid? Clearly something was vexing him. It could smell the unhappiness and longing rolling off him. Kneeling beside Georgie, It gave his head a pat. "You know you can talk to me. About *anything*."

Georgie looked at the clown from the corner of his eye, considering. "I don't want you to be mad."

Pennywise crossed Its chest, where Its heart would be if It had one. "Promise."

He gnawed his bottom lip. "I was just thinking..."

"*Yesss?*"

"I miss my mom."

The only sign It gave that this bothered It was the slightest twitch of Its red nose. "Is that so?"

"Y-yes."

"Well." It fluffed Its ruffled collar, bells jangling. "I might be able to help with that."

Georgie perked up.

"But you've got to make *me* a promise."

"What's that?"

"You've got to eat your vegetables in a *timely manner* next mealtime." It extended one gloved hand and flicked the tip of Georgie's nose with Its long finger.

He let out breathy exhale that was close to a laugh. "Okay, I promise." He held up his pinky finger. "Pinky swear?"

A thin line of saliva descended from Its bottom lip as It contemplated Georgie's proffered finger for an awkward beat. Just as Georgie moved to withdraw his hand, Its arm snapped out and It wound one bony digit around Georgie's pinky.

"Pinky swear," It mimicked.

A small smile quirked Georgie's mouth, and he gently pulled his hand free from Its tight grip.

"Close your eyes."

He did, and heard a faint rustling, like dry leaves being blown by the wind.

Then, his mother's voice. "Georgie?"

It was his mother's slightly freckled face looking down at him, her caramel hair hanging loose, her kind grey eyes. She was wearing that blue floral dress he liked so much. Georgie's breath caught in his throat and his stomach clenched. The floor seemed to tilt under him.

Sharon gave him a half-worried smile. "Georgie?" She rested a warm, soft hand on his cheek. "Are you feeling alright?"

His voice came out as a breathless squeak. "Mom?"

Her eyes crinkled. "Yes."

Chin quivering, eyes burning, he extended his arm out to her. Sharon sat and scooped him into her lap. He wrapped his arm around her neck and buried his face in her shoulder. She smelled of jasmine; he could feel her heart thumping against his chest, slow and steady. She ran her fingers through his hair.

"I've missed you, Mom. I didn't know it, I had forgotten... but I missed you. I'm glad you're here." This last broke on a sob.

Sharon hummed and pressed a kiss to Georgie's head.

Georgie cried quietly for a few moments, and then Sharon held him away from her and wiped at his tears. "That'll do, my little bug. I'm here now."

With an embarrassed chuckle, Georgie rubbed his nose on his sleeve. He adjusted himself on his mother's lap and talked to her well into the night, the fire warm on his outstretched feet, Sharon's fingers combing his hair. He told her about the things he had seen, sometimes giggling, sometimes whispering. He told her about the feats at the circus, the clown that could make things appear out of thin air and contort into knots, Silver the goat, the intruders the clown had somehow slaughtered in the blink of an eye, wandering in the darkness of the sewers, his captivity in the house. He talked about all the friends and family he missed.

Turning his face up toward Sharon's, he asked, "Will you tell Bill I still have the boat? I'm taking good care of it."

"Yes. I will, don't you worry."

Georgie turned back around and rested his head on his mother's chest. He stared into the fire. All of the talking had sapped him. He allowed himself to drift off in Sharon's arms, even though he knew in some dark corner of his mind that she wasn't real.

---

Spending some time in Georgie's room, whether a few minutes or over an hour, had become almost a daily ritual for Bill. Sometimes he would linger in Georgie's room first thing in the morning, sometimes in the afternoon while his mother slept and his father worked, sometimes in the middle of the night. He no longer allowed himself to cry, but he would stand on Georgie's rug or sit on Georgie's bed and breathe in his fading smell, look at his stale belongings. Part of him worried that this wasn't entirely healthy, especially since some things were beginning to look out of place. A sock here, an action figure there. He knew his parents weren't touching anything. So

either the Denbroughs were haunted, or Bill was starting to lose it. And he knew which was more likely.

---

A/N: I think it's implied in the film that Bill hasn't entered Georgie's room since he went missing, so we'll just call this creative liberty.

Reviews are always a treat. Although I have a pretty good idea of where the general plot will go, I am always open to feedback on characters, plot, or scenes that have already been written and suggestions for those that are to come. That's a long way of saying, tell me if something didn't work, and feel free to give me ideas for cool scenes if you got 'em and I can work them into my loose outline.

## 18. Family Matters

A/N: As always, thank you for your patience with me. I am going through some life adjustments now (none of them negative), and I am trying to figure out a good system for updating all of my fics in a more timely manner.

---

Thanksgiving arrived unexpectedly; Bill had thought that the days since Georgie's disappearance dragged, until he stopped and thought about how much time had passed. A month. How could it have been a month? How could there be no arrest, no body, no clue, no hint of an answer, after a month? Time wasn't moving too slow, it was moving too fast. It needed to slow down, give them time. Time for the police to figure out what was happening, time for the Denbroughs to get some answers. How could they celebrate Thanksgiving without Georgie? How could they invite family over and sit around the dinner table and pass bowls of mashed potatoes and green beans and rolls and turkey slices with Georgie's seat empty? Lingering around the house in some sort of dragged-out wake seemed equally as blasphemous, languishing in their grief over a situation that was beyond their control and a senseless waste of time.

The Denbroughs did neither. They went south, to Zack's brother in South Carolina, and the family celebrated Thanksgiving there. Bill was ashamed of how much the change in scenery helped ease the sting of loss. It was if a fog had lifted, more than a little, the moment they left Derry.

---

Georgie had no awareness or comprehension of what time of year it was. He only knew that it was colder. The dots didn't connect for him, dates and days had lost their meaning.

Georgie bunched the dusty blanket tighter under his chin and scooted around to warm his back at the fire. It kept the flames going almost constantly now. Was it fed with real wood harvested from the decaying house and old dead trees in the forest, or were the leaping flames and heat all its doing, a conjuration, real yet not real? It didn't matter. Georgie pondered these things less and less. It was cold and

dark outside, but he was warm, and that was all that mattered, in the end.

It perched on the back of the battered couch, squatting like some bird of prey. Still, but nearly vibrating with alertness, with reined power. Its eyes were locked in a thousand-yard-stare, Its pupils wide, taking everything in with no movement of the eyeballs required. One of Neibolt's many crawling and scurrying residents, a hunchbacked and patchy rat, emerged from a hole between the floor and the crown molding. The rodent hugged the wall as it hurried through the room. In the space of a blink, Pennywise pounced. The smack of Its shoes hitting the floor echoed through the house; It stood with the rodent clenched in Its fingers before the walls had stopped ringing. It hesitated before it crushed the rat, one eye sliding over to Georgie. The rat flailed its tail and gnawed at Pennywise's glove, teeth tearing through fabric and finding nothing.

It judged Georgie for one motionless moment, then grinned a drooly smile. "Want a bite?"

He wrinkled his nose. "No thanks."

"Suit yourself." The rat went down in one gulp.

"Why are you always a clown?"

It licked Its lips with Its prehensile tongue. "Excuse me?"

"You can be other things, right? I've seen it."

"Mmmmm. Yesss." Its eyes went askew. "This is true." Pennywise came over to squat next to Georgie. "This –" It circled Its face with a finger, "– is my favorite."

"Why?"

"I like to have a *goofy, fun* time. Fits me best. Usually."

"Can you turn into anything?"

"Just about."

Georgie thought to ask about the visit from his mother, or the big, black, insectoid thing he had seen tear the squatters apart. But he decided he wasn't sure he would like any answers It would offer him on that front. He wasn't ready to face those truths, not yet.

"What's your favorite color?"

"Red." This shot out so quickly that he had hardly finished his question.

"What's your favorite food?" He bit down on the inside of his cheek; that had been ill-thought out.

Its high, cackling laughter filled the house, and the flames jumped in the fireplace. Georgie didn't wait for It to respond.

"How old are you?"

The laughing abruptly stopped. This interrogation from the bold little one-armed child was interesting, to say the least. Got the saliva running almost as well as the thought of food could. Its collar was soaked. "Very."

"Forty-five?"

"Older."

"Sixty?"

"Older."

"You don't look very old."

"Do I look *young*?"

"Were you around before TVs?"

"Yesss."

"Phones?"

"Yep."

"Cars?"

"Oooolder."

Georgie flapped his hand. "I don't even know how old that is!"

"What's the oldest thing you can think of?"

He twisted his mouth and scratched at his nose. "Dinosaurs."

"I'm so old that the dinosaurs seem like yesterday to me."

Georgie blinked dully, unsure how to process this revelation. It made him feel a little cold and floaty, like his stomach had been sucked out. After another uncomfortable beat, he shelved that piece of knowledge to wrestle with later.

Pennywise was staring at him, piercingly, a long thread of drool dangling from Its lip.

"Are there other Pennywises?"

"What do you mean, exactly? There is only *one* Pennywise the *Daaancing Clown*." It struck a flourish.

"But, I mean..." Twisting his hand in his sweater, Georgie wrestled over how to express his question. "Are there other... things that can change like you?"

"There are many things that can change their form, across all the different universes. If you mean do I have any kin on this planet, well..." It tilted Its head to one side, then the other. "I don't think so."

"Kin?"

"Others of my kind."

"You don't have a family? Any friends?"

It gave a snorting little giggle. "No." Just as suddenly, It went somber and serious. With one long finger, It reached out and pressed Georgie's nose. "Just you."

Feeling a swell of pity, Georgie clasped Pennywise's hand and gave it a squeeze. It withdrew quickly, although not unkindly. Like It was uncomfortable. Making It uncomfortable was probably a bad idea.

"Do you ever sleep? I don't see your bed in this place."

The smile came back. "I *doooo*, but not like *youuuu*."

"What does that mean?"

"I stay awake for months, or maybe a year or two. Then I sleep for a long, *long* time. Twenty-seven years, unless something wakes me up sooner."

"You don't starve in your sleep?"

"I don't *work* the same way you do."

Georgie contemplated this. "What kind of things can wake you up? A loud noise?"

"*Noooo*, not really. Important things. Momentous events."

"Like elections."

"Ah, no. Emotional events. Like... a whole family, burning alive in a housefire."

Georgie grimaced. "You're woken up by bad things?"

Its teeth flashed, sharp and glinting, in Its mouth. "You could put it that way, sure."

Georgie fell silent after that, turning and squinting into the flames. He thought about different planets, cities populated with Dancing Clowns of various sizes and painted-on faces and brightly colored hair, black claws reaching for cavemen sleeping under starry skies. His imagination galloped, time crept by, the fire danced, and his head drooped further at every passing minute. Pennywise brought the couch screeching to the hearth with a wave of Its hand. Georgie climbed onto the chalky cushions. As he drifted into dreams of Pennywise cavorting with a triceratops and a family of giant spider

monstrosities gathered around a pile of offal and human clothing, It slipped away to stalk the shadows of Derry.

---

Upon their return home, Bill became certain that things in Georgie's room were being tampered with. He had stood in the doorway before they left, memorized the messy layout of his brother's vacant space. His parents couldn't have touched anything while they were all gone. And yet Georgie's drawer wasn't shut all the way, and one of his sweaters was missing from the closet, and his toy dump truck was a few inches closer to the bed than it had been when he last saw it. Any explanation he could come up with was less strange than the truth, that a cosmic entity enjoyed tweaking Georgie's room whenever It visited to grab the boy another pair of jeans, or an extra pair of socks.

Bill brought the matter up over the dinner table: "Stuff is being moved around in Georgie's room."

Sharon and Zack both froze.

"Well," Zack began, "You're in his room pretty often. Maybe you –"

"It's not me."

Sharon whispered, "You know we... don't really go in there."

"So what could it be?"

The question hung in the air.

Sharon and Zack began to pick at their dinner again.

"Why are things in Georgie's room –"

Zack let his fork clatter to the plate. "What are you saying? Are you listening to yourself?"

Bill fell silent.

Bill's parents had sent him back to school by the following Monday.

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A/N: Happy Halloween!

## 19. Deformation

A/N: I considered waiting until the irl date and the date of this chapter matched up, just for fun, but that would be mean.

---

Deformation (n) – (in geology) the action or process of changing in shape or distorting, especially through the application of pressure

*December 18th, 1988*

---

Richie sighed loudly and slapped his textbook down onto the table, something he wouldn't have dared if Stan's parents had been home. "I don't know why I should give a shit about any of this stuff. How's trivia about the American Revolution going to help me when I'm pushing papers at some tiny desk?"

"You're too stupid for a desk job." Eddie looked up from his own book with a smirk. "You'll probably end up doing manual labor, or something. Cutting trees or shingling roofs. Maybe a garbage collector."

"I don't know." Stan tugged at his ear as he scribbled something down on his worksheet. "I can't really see Richie lasting at blue-collar work, either."

"Prison, then," Eddie said.

Richie grinned. "Probably worth it to bash your obnoxious face in."

Eddie flung his pen at Richie, who ducked with a quickness that was honed through experience. The missile clattered against the stove.

Stan's brows creased into a small frown as he glanced over at Bill. In older days, before Georgie's *disappearance*, Bill would have gently reprimanded Eddie and Richie. Maybe a mild, "Ok, guys," or "Don't break something, Eddie," or some tactful change in subject. But Bill continued to frown down at his book. The same page, Stan couldn't help but notice, that he had been on ten minutes before.

Richie crowed at some other little quip Eddie had made, and stood abruptly, his chair squealing across the linoleum. He snatched up his pencil and drew back his arm to retaliate. Yelping, Eddie covered his face. Bill's shoulders tensed.

"Cut it out!" Stan barked, harsher than he had intended. "I'm trying to actually get stuff done here."

Richie held up his hands in surrender and sat back down. Eddie mumbled an apology and went to retrieve his pen. Stan snuck another look at Bill. He seemed marginally more relaxed, and flipped to the next page in his book.

After five minutes of silence, Richie cleared his throat. "So, do you guys have plans for Christmas yet?"

Stan said, "Staying in town. I think some family is coming up."

"Wish I could stay," Richie huffed. "We're going to Vermont to visit my grandparents."

"Getting out of Derry for a bit sounds nice."

"Well it would be, but my grandparents are so damn *boring*. What about you, Eds?"

"We're going over to Castle Rock to spend a few days with my cousin."

"Can't be worse than sitting around the house with my grandparents."

"It might be. Castle Rock's just as much of a shithole as Derry. And my cousin's dumb little kid never leaves me alone. He's always nagging me, following me around and trying to get me to play with him. Like he thinks we're brothers, or something." Realizing his mistake immediately, Eddie snapped his mouth shut, eyes wide. "Sorry."

The tension was back in Bill's shoulders, his eyes narrowed. He spoke to his textbook. "We're s-s-staying in tuh-town," he said. "Having my muh-mom's s-s-side come s-stay with us. Lah-like usual." He said this last part in almost a growl.

Eddie, Richie, and Stan all blinked at Bill's downturned head, then at each other.

"Well!" Richie clapped his hands together. "I know I'm getting a zero on this assignment tomorrow, so why fight the inevitable. I can't read about these dusty old pilgrims anymore."

"They aren't pilgrims, Richie," Stan groaned.

Eddie checked his watch. "It's getting a bit late, I should head home before Mom throws a fit."

"You should run away from home one day, to teach her a lesson."

Eddie balked. "Why the hell would I do that?"

"It would be funny. Can you image how much she'd freak?"

"That's exactly why I *wouldn't* do it, Richie. Not to mention how ludicrous it would be to just go wandering off on my own to God-knocks-where."

As Eddie and Richie continued to debate the merits of becoming a middle-school runaway for a prank, Bill closed his book and shoved it into his backpack.

"Hey," Stan whispered. "I can help you with your worksheet if you want. Just give it to me."

"Yuh-you duh-duh-don't n-need -"

"I know, I want to. Hand it over."

Bill held out the paper, which Stan quickly took and slipped under his notebook, before the others could notice.

"Th-thanks." A small smile curved Bill's lips, the first Stan had seen on him in weeks, since before the *Georgie* *thing*.

"Don't mention it."

Bill donned his jacket and gloves and slung his backpack onto his

shoulders. "See you later, guys."

Eddie broke off his argument with Richie. "Hey, want to ride together?"

"I'm ok, you don't have to go out of your way. See you guys tomorrow."

The trio watched Bill leave through Stan's living room window, his tire cutting a skinny, dark path through the thin layer of snow on the street. Stan noticed the tightness was still in Bill's shoulders. He tried to imagine what he would feel like if his brother had died (gone missing), and his parents had tried their best to return to business as usual so soon. He would feel, he imagined, a little bit angry. And still, even as he put himself into Bill's shoes and felt his pain and distress, it was a distant pain and distress. Removed. Clouded by the fog of time, even though Georgie had been tagging along on their trips to the Barrens and the arcade less than two months ago. Could Stan remember what Georgie's face looked like? Not in great detail. Stan yanked on his earlobe. This was concerning.

"Stan the Man." Richie dug a knuckle into Stan's ribcage. "Think you could do my homework for me, too?"

Stan rolled his eyes. "No."

"Why not?"

"Because you could choose to do it. You just don't."

"And Bill couldn't do it?"

"He's kind of going through some shit, Richie. God."

Richie sniffed and pushed his glasses up on his nose, admitting defeat. "Beep, beep. Got it."

"Is it weird that sometimes... I forget?" Eddie wrapped his arms around himself. "I mean, not that Georgie ever existed. But like... that he was... around not that long ago? That he's only been dead for a couple weeks? I mean, missing."

"He's probably dead." Richie squinted out the window like he was peering through the dusting of snow and appraising the dirty, secretive entirety of Derry. Like a jeweler frowning down at a fake gemstone.

"You don't know that," Eddie retorted.

"When a kid is missing that long, it only means one thing. In a trash bag in a ditch somewhere."

"Stan, help me out here."

"I mean... he's probably right. As much as I hate to admit it."

Eddie chewed his lip and gave himself a squeeze.

"But we don't say a word about it around Bill. Got it?"

"Yeah, definitely." Eddie nodded furiously.

Richie snorted. "I'm not a complete fucking idiot."

"Debatable." Eddie yanked his hat down over his ears and shoved his hands into his mittens. "I really ought to get going. Coming, Richie?"

"Yeah. See ya tomorrow, *Stanleyyyyy*." Richie gave Stan's curls a ruffle.

"Bye, Stan."

Stan waved to Eddie and Richie from the doorway, watching them pedal down the street side by side, leaving twin lines of exposed grey asphalt, until they turned a bend and were gone. He curled his lip at the cloudy sky. More snow later. Stanley had never been a big fan of the cold.

---

Pennywise sensed a pressure on the walls of 29 Neibolt Street, a live creature pressing against the structure. On the inside. Curious if Georgie was attempting an escape, It left the corpse It had been gnawing, slithered out of the basement well, snuck up the stairs on silent claws. It pushed the basement door open with only the tiniest

of creaks. The fire crackled in the hearth, alone. It crept up to the second floor. There in his designated bedroom was Georgie, bundled in his layers of thermal underwear and sweaters and socks, face to the window. He had found a spot where some of the weathered newspapers taped to the glass had begun to peel back. Or maybe he had peeled it back himself. Interesting. Silver lay faithfully near his feet, chewing cud.

Before the boy noticed him, It twisted in on Itself like kneaded dough, soundlessly morphing into the clown. It put Its hands on Its hips and bent to peek over Georgie's shoulder. "Whatcha got there?"

Georgie jerked back from the windowsill so quickly that he nearly tripped. He scrunched against the wall with the guilty air of one who has been caught doing something they shouldn't. He couldn't make eye-contact with It, was afraid to see the color of Its eyes, the shape of Its teeth. He knew what It was capable of when provoked. "I-I'm s-s-sorry," he forced through his chattering jaw, a mixture of fear and cold. "I juh-just wah-wanted to see i-f-f-f it was snuh-snowing." He wrung his mitten hands.

It thought that Georgie was bearing a striking resemblance to his stuttering brother, but ignored the urge to make a jab. It let his fear wash over It for a moment, savoring it. Pennywise swallowed a gob of saliva. "And?"

Georgie risked a glance at Its face. Blue eyes, large (but dull) buck teeth, perky orange hair, carefully neutral expression.

"What did you ssssee?" It knew what the weather was, could hear each tiny *click* of snowflake against glass even if It didn't know.

"It's duh-dark, but I think... I th-think it is."

It cocked Its head. "You *like* the snow, Georgie?" Of course he did. He was a seven year-old boy.

"Yeah."

One blue eye drifted to the window. Being locked in the house for weeks was taking its toll. It could hear his decline in weight from his

quieter footsteps, could smell a sort of sourness beginning to seep from his pores, could see the hollowness developing in his cheeks despite the range of nutrition It made sure to provide. His eyes were darker, his hair duller. And It could sense weaknesses, not quite yet cracks, spreading below the surface of the boy's psyche. Did It want a pale, twisted, gibbering lunatic scurrying around Neibolt like one of the rats in the walls? No, It did not. Growing children needed stimulation, exercise. Georgie had craved fresh air so badly that he had risked Its wrath, aware as he was of Its enthusiasm for violence and capability to shift into monsters the human mind could hardly comprehend. That was telling.

"Wanna go outside?"

Georgie's head snapped up. "Leave the house?"

"Yes."

"Not the sewer?"

The underground tunnels were warmer than the surface this time of year, kept clear of ice by Derry's constant moving current of waste: bath and shower water, toilets, sinks, pushed along by gravity, far below where the ice could penetrate. But It doubted that moving Georgie from a chilly, dusty old house to a dark maze of concrete filled with the steam of decomposition would do much good.

"Not the sewer."

Although Georgie perked up a bit, he remained dubious. "Really?"

"Yes, kid, *really*."

"But it's going to be dark out soon."

"And?"

Georgie wrinkled his nose as he painstakingly recalled something that someone (Who? He couldn't remember. Maybe Pennywise?) had told him, a long time ago. "It's not safe to go out at night."

"And what do you think is out there that's *bigger* and *badder* than

me?" It let out a rough sort of giggle and shook Its frilled collar.

A wide grin beamed from Georgie's face. "Can I bring Silver?"

"Sure. Why the hell not. Wait by the fireplace."

It ducked over to the Denbrough house. It knew from Georgie's own memories what his winter jacket and boots looked like and where they were stored in the closet. It took two scarves from his dresser as well.

It returned to see Georgie working his multi-socked feet into his filthy rubber boots. "That just won't do," It tittered. "Here." It dumped Its haul at the boy's feet. Once Georgie was sufficiently bundled up, It put a thin, spidery hand on his shoulder.

*Pop!*

They were in the middle of the forest, surrounded by various white-dusted evergreens – pines and spruces – and the black skeletons of other trees who had long dropped their leaves. The setting sun peeked through the gaps in the foliage, red-orange. A gust of wind displaced a cloud of snow from the limbs overhead, right into Georgie's face. He stamped his feet, crunching the snow beneath his soles. Silver bleated and knocked Its head against Georgie's leg. Georgie giggled and knelt down to bury his hands in the snow. He jumped up and flung an armload of white above his head, shrieking when some made it between his hat and scarf. He scooped up another handful and tossed it at Silver. Silver hopped, wriggled Its tail, and bounded out of reach.

Pennywise crouched in the shadow of a thick spruce, half-hidden by the trunk. With yellow-eyed intensity, It watched boy and figment-goat chase each other, controlling one like a puppet on strings. Its saliva froze when it hit the crust of snow around the base of the trunk.

When Georgie thought to call Pennywise's name and searched about, the clown was nowhere to be seen. He felt a moment of panic – had he been abandoned in the woods, in winter, with darkness not far off? Then a little flame of something like hope – maybe he was close

to a road, or a house. Just as quickly, he realized that It wouldn't leave him alone, not really. It was always watching, always there. The odd sort of hope sputtered out, but so did the worry. Silver thumped his leg with a warbling yell, and Georgie resumed playing.

Its claws dug small furrows into the bark.

No matter how much Georgie ran after Silver and vice-versa, he never seemed to leave that same patch of woodland. Just as it was beginning to get too dark to see and a little colder than was comfortable, just as Georgie caught up to Silver and reached for Its little fluff of a tail, he felt a hand land on the back of his neck, plucking him up like a puppy by the scruff. Then he was back in Neibolt, in front of the crackling fire. A sort of makeshift bed had been laid out near the hearth, and Silver was lying next to it. And, what looked like, a mug of hot chocolate.

"Thanks for the trip!" Georgie called into the house.

*Don't mention it* appeared in the thick layer of dust on the hearth.

## 20. Twas the Night Before Christmas

A/N: Mer Chrismas

I'll reiterate that I haven't read the novel, so I apologize if Sheriff Sullivan is OOC

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*December 24th – 25th, 1988*

"Can we go outside again?" Georgie hopped on the balls of his feet, hands fisted in front of his chin. He almost had to restrain himself from yanking on Pennywise's puffy sleeve.

One blue eye rolled down to look at the boy. It tittered. That one indulgence had given him some boldness, it seemed. "Nooot yet." It popped this last letter, almost as loud as a bursting balloon. "Maybe, oncccce it's dark."

Georgie huffed, but didn't argue. "Ok."

Its stomach twisted, hunger gnawing. "Why don't you... go take a nap."

"I'm not tired." With Its face turned away from him, toward the wall, he missed the sharp golden flash in Its eyes. Wouldn't have pushed the clown, if he hadn't.

It placed Its hand on his head. "I think you are."

Georgie yawned widely. "I guess... I guess so."

"Good. *Ssssilver* will keep you company." It turned Georgie toward the doorway and gave him a light shove. He shuffled to his room, socks snagging on the rough wooden floor. It cocked Its head and *listened*, listened with the whole house. Once Georgie had collapsed onto his nest of half-rotted mattress, blankets, pillow, and hay (he had recently shoved Silver's pile of hay onto his own bed to combine their sleeping spaces, probably indicated that the kid was getting pretty lonely, even if only subconsciously), It melted through the floorboards. As It skittered through the sewer, It sent Silver trotting

over to the messy nest and had It flop down next to Georgie's already dozing form.

It knew who Its target was. It had been stalking and harassing Charlie Oakley for the past several weeks, wasn't really sure when It was going to strike and snap Charlie up for good. But Charlie's fate had come, because Its guts were growling with hunger and keeping Georgie in the house meant It couldn't risk having the munchies.

It squeezed itself up the Dupoint family's plumbing system, head and shoulders emerging from the toilet bowl with a splash of water and a shrieking cackle. Its red-rimmed, yellow irises peered through locks of Its soaking orange hair and found little Marlene, halfway through her first year in middle school, cowering in the corner of the bathroom. Her chubby, freckled hand clutched the rim of the sink as if it could offer her any protection. Her blonde curls shivered with her shaking body; her pink mouth opened, but no sound came out. The clown's own mouth, ruby red, parted in a gaping shark's grin. No time was wasted. Its limbs were sure on the puddled tile floor as It launched Itself from the toilet. Marlene died with a quiet, gurgling gasp that her parents did not hear from the living room, where they were engaged with the television.

Pennywise did not leave Marlene's body to be discovered. It carried her corpse down underneath the city, where It devoured her entirely, Its growls and smacks echoing through the tunnels. When It was done, It left only scraps of clothing floating on the steaming greywater.

---

In the early hours of the morning, Georgie was awoken by a wiry hand grabbing his shoulder, shaking. He groaned and rubbed his face with the back of his fist. He rolled away from the hand on his shoulder.

"C'mon, Shortstop. Wakey *wakeyyyy.*"

Georgie let out a heavy exhale and flopped onto his back.

"I thought you wanted to go *sssssee* the *sssssnow*."

"Mmmm. I do." He blinked up at the ceiling.

"Then let'ssss GO."

"I'm getting up, I'm getting up." Georgie rubbed his face again and sat up. Silver, folded next to him and already quite awake, snorted. In fact, now that he thought about it, he didn't think he had ever seen Silver sleep. The hand on his shoulder curled into his sweater and tugged. "Okay." Georgie swatted at the hand with a grin. "Where are my shoes?"

"Right here." It wiggled his boots in front of his face.

The instant Georgie had put his boots on, the clown clapped Its palm on his back.

*Pop.*

The cold seared Georgie's throat on his startled inhale. The stars pricked the black sky above him. The darkness was almost absolute, the snow-covered ground barely distinguishable. He shuffled forward one step, then two. On his third step, his foot hit something, a rock or a root, and he fell. The snow was at least a foot deep, thick enough that it cushioned his fall. He heard movement behind him, soft crunching on the snow.

"It's too dark. Pennywise? I can't see anything."

Three glowing orange globes the size of grapefruits appeared over his prone form. They cast a warm, soft light, like candles. Georgie shoved himself to his feet and shook the snow from his collar and the cuffs of his mittens. The trees around him were illuminated by the light It had conjured, just enough to avoid running into them. Georgie moved a few steps ahead. The orbs followed him, bobbing on the icy wind. He ran, wading through the shin-high snow, occasionally tripping. The orbs took up a formation: one in front of him, one behind, and one above. He weaved through the trees, relishing the snow under his feet and the cold in his lungs.

After only a moment or two of this aimless running, he heard thumping. Multiple footsteps, following him. Georgie gave a

delighted squeal and increased his speed. The odd, jittering sound of spider-scurrying shifted into a heavy four-legged gallop. He heard whatever form It had taken huffing like a steam engine, gaining ground. There was a bone-shaking growl and a snap of teeth near the back of his neck. Georgie gave a yell that was mostly excitement, but carried a tiny kernel of unease.

He could feel the pressure of Its exhalations on the back of his coat now, half-expected It to latch onto his nape at any moment. He didn't dare to look over his shoulder, afraid that whatever he saw would sap the fun from this chase, would chase him later in his dreams. Something bumped against his lower back, almost sending him sprawling, and he let out another shriek. In an attempt to shake It, Georgie leapt to the side, ducking under a screen of low branches. He heard It give a surprised sort of growling yelp, heard Its feet skid through the snow and into the dirt below. It smashed through the boughs and quickly recovered the distance It had lost. Jaws closed over his leg, not hard enough to tear through his clothes, not hard enough to hurt, but the velocity at which he hit the ground almost did.

Georgie felt the thing panting above him in something close to a laugh as he tried to regain his bearings. He rolled onto his back with a groan. A dark, shaggy shape loomed over him, eyes a blue so bright they nearly glowed. The orbs coasted over to hover closer. He saw triangle ears, a pointed snout. He reached out to touch Its muzzle, and It shrank back from him, allowing him room to sit up.

"You sure know how to give someone a heart attack," Georgie said, then laughed as he remembered who he was talking to: a shapeshifting clown that had lived since the dinosaurs and ate people. It laughed too, in a doggy sort of way, lips pulling back to expose sharp teeth.

As Georgie pushed himself to his feet, It feinted toward him with a rough, deep bark. He flinched back, nervous smile curling his lips. It barked again and Georgie sprinted into the trees. They kept up this game of catch-and-release, Georgie yelling and screaming and on the verge of real fear, It savoring that sharp edge of anxiety, until Georgie remained where he had been tripped and declared that he was too tired to keep running.

Its teeth pinched Georgie's coat and the air around them compressed.

*Pop.*

They were at the school. The playground, to be exact. Snow had given everything a dusting of frosting. Georgie went down the slide, bringing a wave of snow with him to the bottom. He climbed onto the seesaw, and It placed Its large forepaws on the opposite end, lifting him up and letting him down with stomach-turning speed. When he grew bored of this, Georgie went over to the swing set and brushed the snow from one of the seats. He settled himself and put on his best puppy-eyed face.

"Push me?"

The giant wolf-dog thing trotted over, red tongue lolling. It shook Itself and melted down into Pennywise. It stood in the snow and regarded Georgie with that drooling, slightly open-mouthed, thousand-yard stare that he knew meant It was thinking about something big and important.

He scissored his legs in the air. "Please? I let you knock me down like, ten times."

Its boots crunched and jingled as It took up position behind Georgie. A large hand planted itself on his back and shoved. The swing set's screech echoed across the field.

How had It ended up here? Standing in a snowy playground and pushing a child on a swing? It was the Disease of Derry, the Eater of Worlds, the Devourer of Children. It did not play with kids – It played with Its food. Instead of tenderizing prey with terror or filling Its sewer pantry, It was spending valuable time awake indulging this boy. True, It had been struck by a fancy some decades ago, and had engaged in a few curious... experiments. And It had failed. Turns out that children and interdimensional, ancient, near-immortal child-eaters didn't naturally get along. It had resigned Itself to failure.

But It was, occasionally, a fickle creature. It could admit that. And that fancy had reappeared quite suddenly in the midst of Its attack on Georgie. It could not say why. Perhaps it was merely chance. But It

had learned from Its past experiences and, thus far, It had managed to keep Georgie alive and mostly sane.

What was it like to have children? Its periodic spawns could not substitute, were nothing more than propagation of the species. It ran the spiderlings off the moment they hatched, chased them off to different worlds, lest they grow up to compete with It for food and fear and space. Lest they draw unwanted attention to It, the attention of higher and older beings who might pose a threat. No, no comparison. No love lost, there.

Oh, It was well aware that Its current situation was much more akin to a hostage-captor relationship than a child-parent one. Knew that the odds were slim that Georgie would get any more comfortable with and trusting of It than he was then. But Georgie had proven to not be entirely predictable (case in point: the request that It push him on the swing), and It was curious how things would develop. It held on to the curiosity, and didn't let Itself dwell on the worry. The worry that It was developing cracks. Cracks that had allowed something resembling loneliness tickle Its deep subconscious, something resembling a different want from food and sleep.

So it would humor Georgie, for as long as It amused It to. For as long as Georgie continued to surprise and entertain.

"Where's Silver?"

The hand rhythmically shoving Georgie's back didn't falter. "Right here. He followed us."

Silver trotted around to the front of the swing set with a bleat. His hooves didn't disturb the snow.

"Isn't he cold?"

"Nah. He's a *tough* little guy."

It became aware that they were being watched. The clown's large head turned, yellow eyes glaring balefully across the white field to the figure standing at the waist-high chain link fence. The janitor. Dirty coat hanging off his smelly frame, boots spattered with mud,

beer on his breath, half-finished twelve-pack hanging from one hand and glowing cigarette from the other. It looked into his alcohol-fogged mind and saw he came here often to get drunk in peace, away from his noisy apartment neighbors. Always arguing or fucking. It bared Its teeth at him.

Georgie realized that Pennywise had stopped pushing. "What's wrong?"

*"Time to go."* Each word was an angry pop.

A strong gust of wind kicked up a cloud of snow over the field. The janitor squinted. When the flurry of white had settled, the kid, clown, and goat were gone.

---

Sheriff Sullivan was woken by his phone. He turned on his bedside lap and mumbled a string of curses as he rubbed the sleep from his face. He glanced at his clock. Two in the morning. Christ. The phone let out another shrill cry. Still lying on the bed, he snatched it from the cradle with a little more force than necessary.

"Yeah?"

Bowers' raspy chuckle came over the line. "I got a call from Ed Jacobson. The janitor over at the middle school. You're not gonna believe this, Hank."

Sullivan rolled his eyes up to the ceiling. "It can't wait until morning? It's Christmas Eve for God's sake."

"Your wife and kids are gone, Hank, don't pretend you got anything important to do tomorrow."

Sullivan barked out a laugh. "Fuck you. I'm still entitled to a good night's sleep on Christmas Eve."

Bowers sighed. "You know I wouldn't have bothered you if it wasn't important. If it really could wait."

"What kind of crazy shit is that loony tune telling you, this time?"

"It's the missing kid. The Denbrough one."

Sullivan sat up, sleepiness gone. Images of the mutilated children he'd found over the years marched through his head: yellow crime scene tape and pale flesh and flashing red-blue lights and purple lividity spots and half-open eyes and numbered evidence tags and defensive wounds and shredded clothing and postmortem damage from scavenging animals. "Where's the body? Have you called forensics?"

"Ed says he saw George alive."

Sullivan flung back his bedsheets and plucked up his jeans from the floor. "You're shittin me. Where?"

"The middle school playground. Listen, Hal, I wouldn't get your hopes up. He says he also saw a goat. And... a clown. A monster clown."

Sullivan didn't slow in wrestling his jeans up his legs. "Listen, Bowers. Ed might be a crazy, drunk sonuvabitch, but a broken clock is right twice a day. And if he says he saw the Denbrough boy, he might have seen the Denbrough boy."

"Understood, sir."

"See you at the school, then."

---

Before the Denbroughs and convened in the living room to exchange presents between father and mother and son, before the sun had fully crested the horizon, they were woken by insistent banging on their front door punctuated by repeated punching of the doorbell.

Zack answered, still in his shirt and boxers. Sharon hovered on the stairs, knotting a bathrobe around her waist, Bill hovering behind. When Sharon saw Bowers and Sullivan on her porch, she hurried down to stand next to her husband. Bill remained on the landing. He couldn't hear everything, but he heard enough. A call made to the police in the middle of the night. Someone had seen Georgie. At the school. An exhaustive sweep made of the property. No one found. But there were footprints in the snow. Adult and child. The tread didn't match Georgie's rain boots, but they looked the same size. No trail

found leaving the school. Nothing conclusive. Nothing conclusive. But thought you should know.

Sharon sagged against Zack with a soft sort of moaning cry. Bill threw himself up the stairs, nearly skidded into Georgie's room. He fell to his knees in front of Georgie's closet and dragged out his shoes. Scuffed sneakers, one pair of sandals, clunky ski boots, dusty hiking boots. The green rain boots he had been wearing the day of his disappearance were, of course, absent. But his wooly, rubber-soled snow boots, where were they? Bill dug back through the pile of shoes to be sure, checked under the bed, in the dresser drawers. Gone. And his thick, puffy coat. Gone. His sweaters and mittens and thermal underwear. All gone. His sock-and-underwear drawer was half-empty. The blankets from the top of his closet were missing. And some of his toys, Bill could swear they were gone too.

Bill ran to the bathroom and vomited into the toilet.

## 21. Crystallization

A/N: Will the IT Part 2 come out before this fic is completed?  
Maybe...

Suggested listening: Crystals by Of Monsters and Men

---

*December 25th, 1988*

Stan's peaceful Christmas afternoon, complete with TV and comics (not much else to do) was disturbed by a frantic banging on his front door. He couldn't have said why, but he knew immediately that something was wrong. His father's hollered order to ignore it, they weren't expecting visitors, went unheeded. Before Donald's last syllable had ceased to bounce off the walls, Stan had flung the front door wide. Stan's stomach went cold and hard and sank toward his intestines the instant he laid eyes on Bill. Bill had carelessly tossed his bike onto the snowy lawn, was wearing nothing over his sweater, and his hands and head were bare. His eyes were watery and his nose was red. Stan could already feel his skin shrinking on his bones. It must have been close to zero out.

"What's wrong?"

"I-i-it's Juh-juh-juh." Bill paused, grit his teeth. "Juh-Georgie."

Stan felt like he might puke, he wasn't ready for this.

Bill sniffed and rubbed at his nose, and Stan realized that his eyes and nose weren't just red from the cold. "Suh-s-s-suh-someone s-s-saw him. B-b-by the s-s-s-school."

"Bill, I..." Stan trailed off. How could he tell Bill that he wasn't ready to see Georgie's decomposing, frozen body dumped like trash at a location he visited five times a week, would never be ready?

"Alive. Th-th-they s-s-s-s-saw him w-with s-s-someone. A-alive."

Stan saw the world tilt, and gripped the front door a little tighter.  
"What? Are you sure?"

"Cuh-cuh-come on. G-g-get d-d-dressed!"

"Who saw him?"

"Juh-Jacobson."

"The janitor?" Stan cringed at the disbelief in his voice. It was well-known that Jacobson was often in the bottle, and tended to see questionable things on his nightly walks.

"Y-yes, cuh-come on!" Bill half-made to return to his bike.

"Stanley!" Donald's voice trumpeted through the house. "Who's there?"

"Just wait a second, okay?" Stan whispered. "Wait in here, warm up."

"I-ll w-w-wait here."

"It's goddam freezing out, Bill. Get in."

Bill brushed past Stan and threw himself into one of the kitchen chairs hard enough to make it squeak a few inches across the linoleum. "H-hurry."

Stan trotted down the hallway to his father's study, silently, on the balls of his feet – Donald didn't allow running in the house. He took a second to compose himself before knocking on the door.

"Come in."

Using a commendable amount of control, Stan gently opened the door instead of busting through. Donald didn't look up from his desk, where he was scratching intently in his leather-bound journal. Stan pinched his earlobe, then consciously shoved his hand into his pocket. "Sir."

Donald's eyebrows arched above his glasses. "Yes?"

"Bill's here. We're going to go hang out. If that's alright with you."

Donald did look up then, frowning. "Bill's here on Christmas? Why

isn't he with his family?"

"They're all meeting up later, I think." Stan felt a twinge at how easily the lie came.

"Hm. Don't make him late to his family."

"I won't."

Stan didn't dwell on the hot water he'd be in when Mr. Uris found out why he had hurried off with Bill – and Donald would find out, in this small town. Some things were more important than staying out of trouble with parents.

Although Stan hadn't exactly been expecting the school to be swarming with police, he was a little surprised to see only two squad cars parked on the side of the street. Their lights weren't even flashing. But Stan could just see yellow crime scene tape fluttering, across the street and through the chain link fence and past the field. Some passersby had stopped to look.

"Where are your parents?" Stan asked Bill.

"They'll be here."

Bill let his bike clatter to the sidewalk and jogged over to the fence. Stan carefully lowered his kickstand before following. Crime scene tape had been strung up on little wooden stakes, sectioning off the playground. One cop could be seen picking his way around the perimeter with a bloodhound, another was photographing the ground around the swings. Definitely no body.

Out of the corner of his eye, Stan saw Bill tap the man next to him. "Eh-eh-excuse me. D-d-do you nuh-know w-w-what th-they f-found?"

"Ayuh, Bowers was over here just a moment ago. Said it's strange. Footprints around the swings, one real massive set and one kiddy-size. No prints leading to or from the swings."

*Real professional.*

"Say, you're that Denbrough kid, ain't yah? Older brother? I'm sorry for your loss, truly."

Stan looked over at Bill. Despite his glistening eyes, Stan saw the set in his jaw, the tension in his shoulders. Bill hadn't wanted to come alone, but he would have come without Stan, if he had to.

"Where are your parents?" Stan asked again.

Bill worked his jaw, but said nothing.

Stan knew then that Bill would never give up hope, never stop looking for Georgie. Not until he had his brother's corpse at his feet.

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For hours after the damned janitor had spotted It and Georgie on the playground, It sulked in 29 Neibolt Street's basement, grumbling and growling to Itself in the dark and the dirt. Georgie sat in "his" room, stroking Silver's fur (the goat had gone strangely still and unresponsive, but Georgie hardly noticed). He listened to the wind blowing snow against the rickety roof and flinched at each bang and thud that echoed up from the basement. As far as Its tantrums went, this one was quite mild. A few kicked cans and knocked-over shelving was nothing compared to the heights Its wrath could reach. Dozens of Derry citizens had been wiped out over less.

Truthfully, It wasn't just angry (partly because the only thing It could blame was Itself, and It was never one for self-blame). A teeny, tiny part of It was *scared*. It had slipped. It had lost focus, hadn't noticed the drunk, stumbling fool make his way within a stone's throw of It and the boy. *How* had It not noticed? To dwell on how, why, steered It toward an unthinkable thought – that It was growing more than a bit soft, and in more ways than one. So It circled back to anger, which was shortly tamped out by the fear, and so on. It stewed in the basement, shimmering and slithering, melting from the clown into the spider, then the janitor, then some twitching horse abomination with sharp teeth and ink hair, then into a half-frozen and raven-pecked Georgie (cloudy eyes and all). Finally, It stopped. It could continue on this way for hours more. Days. What It needed to do was set this mental tangle aside for now. What It needed to do was eat.

Georgie didn't realize the ruckus downstairs had ceased until he jerked awake. The few rays of light filtering around the newspaper pasted to the window was strong. It was midday. He had slept for a

while. He seemed to sleep more, lately.

*Plop.* A clod of snow fell from the roof to the ground below. So that was what woken him.

Silver lay next to Georgie's ramshackle hay-and-blanket bed, staring at the wall and chewing his cud. Georgie reached out and scratched his back. The goat's tuft of a tail flapped.

Everything downstairs was quiet. Had It left the house? He was often left alone for long stretches of time, but he wanted to be sure he had the house to himself. If Pennywise was still pouting (and over what, he wasn't sure), then he would tread carefully so as not to draw Its anger. If Pennywise was gone, then he could do just about whatever he wanted. Maybe he could egg Silver into playing with him. Maybe he'd sleep. Maybe he'd use one of the rat-chewed rugs as a sled and slide across the kitchen floor.

Georgie sat up, brushed the hay and bits of dead leaf from the bottoms of his socks, and tugged on his sneakers. He and Pennywise had brushed most of the detritus from his room, but the rest of the house remained filthy and ever since Pennywise had begun keeping Georgie's room warm (the flickering shadows cast by the fireplace had started to give him nightmares, ones in which black spider arms reached for his legs and darkness swallowed him and he screamed for help in the cold wet black while his arm burned and buzzed with a pain he had never felt in his life and his blood ran down the back of his throat), puddles had been prone to forming in the kitchen underneath. So Georgie put on his sneakers and rose to go see if Pennywise was still pouting downstairs.

A gust of cold air hit him when he opened his bedroom door. He winced, and turned back to pull on another sweater. He tucked his bare hands into his armpits and scrunched his shoulders up to his ears. "See ya in a minute, Silver."

The goat continued to stare ahead and mouth his nonexistent cud.

No matter how quiet Georgie tried to be, his shoes still crunched on the leaves, twigs, bits of broken glass, and crumpled newspapers scattered around the floor. He quickly gave up trying to be stealthy;

It always seemed to know everything that went on in this house anyway. It would know he was coming downstairs. Pausing on the landing, he held his breath and listened. No rough giggling or scuttling of crab feet came from below. Georgie descended the creaky stairs and peered around the entrance hall, the lounge, the living room. No clown. The kitchen, too, was empty. But he did hear something. A wet sort of chewing sound coming from the half-open door down to the basement.

In earlier days, Georgie would have quailed at the thought of going into the basement. The one at his old house (which he could recall only vaguely, and then only in dreams or when he concentrated very hard) had always frightened him, and that was before he knew that immortal, shapeshifting, children-eating clowns existed. But Georgie had changed quite a bit in two months, and he had learned that there are things more frightening than the dark. He had also learned that the clown was always aware of what was in the house and could leap to his aid within moments.

Georgie's hand trembled only a little as he reached out to push the door wide. It was even colder in the basement, he could feel it from where he stood. The chewing did not hesitate at the squeaking of the basement door's hinges. "Hello?"

The chewing did pause, then.

"Pennywise?"

"Heya there, *Georgie*. Care to join me?" Its voice was strange, rough and wet.

Georgie edged down one step into the darkness, two. "I can't see, I'll fall."

"Well, we can't have *that*, now can we?"

A pair of yellow-orange globes, like anglerfish lures, blinked into existence at the foot of the stairs and bobbed there. They cast a soft glow that reminded Georgie of candlelight. He picked his way down the rotting wooden steps. His shoes pressed into the soft dirt of the basement. He felt the damp seeping into his clothes, frizzing his hair

and chilling his lungs. The lights floated onward, and he followed them. He stepped around a smashed paint can, several splintered boards, a shredded rug. In a few places, the floor was scored with deep slashes from Its claws. Finally, the soft light fell upon the clown. It was crouched next to a stone well like the kinds Georgie had seen in picture books, back to him. It was gnawing on something. Slowly, It twisted around. Its chin and frilly collar were smeared with blood. Its jagged fangs were visible through Its parted lips. A giraffe-like tongue snaked out and swirled around Its mouth. For a long moment, It fixed Its yellow, slitted eyes on Georgie and said nothing. Georgie stared back.

"Ya hungry, kid?"

As if on command, Georgie's stomach clenched painfully. He couldn't remember the last time he had eaten, or what it had been (remembering things was getting hard these days). A dry granola bar? A bruised apple? A chicken thigh starting to go a little slimy? He nodded.

Pennywise jerked Its head. Georgie came closer. It turned to face him fully, and he saw that clenched between Its fingers was a dripping, torn hunk of raw meat that stained Its gloves crimson. It patted the ground next to It; Georgie's eyes followed the dirt that clung to Its wet hand. Obediently, he knelt down next to the clown.

The strange lights bobbed above them, drawing long shadows under Its jaw and sweeping hair. Its eyes were still yellow, but the pupils had rounded out. The meat dripped onto the ground. Georgie could see a shard of bone gleaming in the dim light. Pennywise frowned down at him, painted mouth pursed ever so slightly. Georgie looked up at It. He realized that It did not breathe. He felt a little floaty in the brain. Maybe it was the hunger, or the cold, or the weird light down in the basement, or something else entirely.

It extended the chunk of flesh. Georgie took it, grasping it between his hands. It was quite warm and felt pleasant on his cold fingers. He turned it this way and that, studied it. Then he sank his teeth into the raw red meat, the taste of copper and something like tender pork filling his mouth. Blood dribbled from his chin. He expected It to laugh, but It was silent.

Unbeknownst to Georgie, It was thinking about a good many things. The foremost being what should be done in light of the janitor spotting them and alerting the police. A great deal of Its power lied in the fact that Its existence was unknown, of course. On this topic, It decided that It would allow Derry to more or less remember the janitor's tale. The resulting goose chase and inevitable loss of morale would be *funny*.

The second being this whole *kid* thing. The hassle, the affect it might be having on It (the playground blunder being a clear example). How much further could this experiment go, really? What else was there? But yet again, Georgie had proven that he was still full of surprises. The moment his incisors touched the meat (which came from Molly Kane's thigh), his future was secure, at least for the time being.

As Georgie swallowed and clamped his teeth down on the thigh again, It reached over and pressed a bloody finger against the tip of Georgie's nose. He wrinkled his nose in response, a half-playful growl working around the meat. Its finger left a red spot, like a seal, or the crimson on Its own face.

## 22. Reflections

A/N: Guess who's back

Back again

No I'm not dead. This is by far the longest chapter I've done for this fic. Consider it a consolation gift for my long absence.

I had to do a bit of research to fill in the gaps in my knowledge of Derry, and I had to take a teeny bit of creative freedom. I'll reiterate I haven't read the novel. I apologize for any errors. Particularly if the Ironworks ruins were cleared away by the time *It* takes place.

Reviews are always appreciated.

Reflection - an image given back by a reflecting surface; a thought, idea, or opinion formed or a remark made as a result of meditation; consideration of some subject matter, idea, or purpose

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*December 27th, 1988*

"Wait, wait, wait." Richie raised his hands and flapped them in front of his face, as if clearing the air. "You actually believe this shit?"

Bill, Stan, Eddie, and Richie were currently holding council on Stan's bedroom floor, at Bill's request. Richie was still wearing the clothes he'd worn on the ride back to Derry, and Eddie knew that his mother would give him an ass-chewing for not unpacking before he left with his friends.

Clenching his jaw, nostrils flaring, Bill said, "I duh-duh-don't h-have any uh-other ch-ch-ch-choice."

"Bill." Richie tried to adopt a placating tone. "This is *horseshit*."

"Why? Wh-wh-why are you s-s-s-so c-convincing that juh-Georgie's dead?"

"Because it's been two months!"

Eddie wrung his hands and glanced at Stan, who was staring at the wall of his bedroom and very pointedly not paying attention.

"S-s-suh-omeone w-w-was k-k-eeping h-him!"

"We all know that Jacobson is crazy. God knows what he really saw. But I'd bet my left nut that it wasn't Georgie playing on the swings, perfectly a-okay."

Bill pressed his fists against his thighs. "That's f-f-fine. You d-don't ha-ha-have to buh-believe m-me."

"I believe you. I just don't believe the batshit crazy janitor."

"You c-c-can st-stay here and r-r-read your f-fuckin' comics and wuh-watch TV. While I l-look f-f-for juh-juh-Georgie."

Richie sniffed, crossed his arms, pushed his glasses up his nose, crossed his arms again. "Who said anything about not going with you?"

Relaxing some, Bill turned to Eddie. "Wh-what a-a-about y-you?"

Eddie bit his thumbnail. "I..." he started, hesitantly. "I think I'm in the same boat as Richie."

Rubbing his temples, Bill realized this was probably the best he could hope for. "F-fine."

Stan was still staring at nothing.

"Uh." Eddie cleared his throat. "What do your parents think?"

"Th-th-they think Juh-Juh-Jacobs-s-s-on i-i-imagined it. O-o-or wuh-was s-so d-d-drunk th-that he m-m-made a mi-mistake."

Eddie cut his eyes at Richie before he could say something insensitive.

With a loud sigh, Stan peeled his eyes from the wall. "What's your plan?"

"W-well," Bill ran a hand through his hair. "H-h-he c-can't be f-f-far.

O-or i-i-if who-whoever has h-h-him t-took off once h-he'd been s-s-s-seen.... I g-guess th-th-there's n-not muh-much we c-can d-d-do." Bill chewed his bottom lip, frustrated that his speech impediment was making every sentence a chore, and that frustration only compounding the problem.

Eddie gulped audibly.

"I... I wuh-was k-k-kind of wuh-wuh-waiting t-to s-s-see whu-what –" Bill broke off, ground his teeth together, and tried to calm himself. "Wh-what you g-guys th-th-thought."

Richie, Eddie, and Stan watched Bill, none of them willing to voice their true opinions.

"I g-g-guess... Huh-hold on." Bill got up. "St-Stan, d-do you h-have some-something I c-can draw wuh-with?"

"Since he's not home now, Dad's office." Stan began to rise.

"I'll g-get it." Bill darted out of Stan's bedroom.

Richie leaned across the floor. "What do you think about all this?"

"I think the janitor *believes* he saw Georgie, and I think Bill needs to believe it too."

Eddie started chewing on his thumb again, worrying a hangnail. "But you don't think Georgie was playing on the playground in the middle of the night with a giant clown?"

"No."

"Have you been listening to this crazy bullshit for the past two days?" Richie's brow knotted in something almost like sympathy.

Eddie sighed. "Listening to it, and following him around and putting up more signs. He even dragged me back to Henry's fuckin' place –"

Eddie whispered, "Jesus."

"– And he's been checking the playground every day."

"It's not a crime scene or whatever anymore?" Richie asked.

"Nah. They didn't find anything, so they cleared out the same afternoon."

Richie pursed his lips and looked at the floor. Eddie glanced at him, worried at his silence.

Bill's footsteps pounded back up the hallway. In his hands he held two sheets of paper and a pencil. He dropped to his knees on Stan's rug. "Ok-kay, s-s-so. W-we have t-to th-thi-think ab-about wh-wh-where he's-s being k-kept." Bill looked around the circle.

When no one answered, Richie lifted his shoulders. "That makes sense, I guess."

Stan said nothing, and Eddie hummed.

"I-ind-doors," Bill said, writing it on one of the pieces of paper. "O-or he wuh-wuh-would ha-have fuh-fuh-fuh-" he paused, took a deep breath. "F-f-frozen."

"Someone could have given him blankets," Richie said.

"It gets too cold, especially after dark," Eddie said. "The human body gives out as soon as the internal temperature gets below, like, ninety degrees or something."

Richie looked to Stan for help.

"He's right."

"Of course he would know that," Richie said as he rolled his eyes. "Well, what about fire, then?"

"Al-alright. I-it's-s pos-pos-s-sib-ble..." Bill stopped to calm his tripping tongue. "B-but not li-likely. F-f-for n-now, l-let's-s s-s-say he-he's insi-ide."

Richie curled his lip. "Fine. But I still think some forest hermit could have shoved him in a cave some -"

"Beep, beep, Richie," Stan and Eddie both muttered.

Richie pushed his glasses up on his nose.

"S-so, in-ind-doors..."

"Abandoned," Stan said. "No one using it."

"G-g-good." Bill made another bullet point.

"There might be some way they're keeping him quiet, so it could be close to other people," Eddie added.

Bill nodded.

"It can't be a *total* wreck," Richie said. "Otherwise, he'd still freeze."

Bill tapped the pencil against his teeth.

"We'll have to stick to places we can get to and back in an hour or so," Stan said. When he saw Bill begin to bristle, he added, "I'm just being practical. We've gotta stick to places in Derry."

"Wuh-what i-i-if-f he's-s n-not being k-kept *in* D-Derry?"

"Then we'll cross that bridge when we get to it. We have to stick with what we can get to without our parents knowing."

"He's right," Eddie piped in.

Bill gave the pencil a good chomp. "O-okay. F-f-fair."

"Well," Richie looked around the circle. "I think that's as specific as we can get right now. Abandoned buildings in Derry. What's first on the Scooby Gang's agenda?"

Bill reached for the other sheet of paper. He quickly sketched out a sloppy map of Derry, marking the most important streets and buildings. "I th-th-think w-wuh-what we're left w-with is-s th-this..." Bill circled six squares. "Th-that c-c-creepy hou-house on N-N-Neibolt, th-the empty w-warehou-house, Ironw-w-works, run-down auto l-lot, and th-these c-c-closed sh-sh-shops."

"I vote for poking around the old stores first," Eddie said.

"Of course you do, you pussy," Richie sneered, but there was a grin peeking through his faux derision.

"Fuck you."

"Where's your sense of adventure?"

"Richie," Eddie hissed.

"It's the middle of the day, not a good time to check out the stores. People will be around." Stan said.

"The warehouse, then!" Richie crowed.

Eddie groaned.

Stan turned to Bill. "When do you want to start?"

Bill peered out at the mid-afternoon sun. "Now?"

"Now?" Eddie squeaked.

Richie stood and bent backward, cracking his back. "Okay, we just have to be done before dark. We have school tomorrow, and my ma will throw a fit."

"Your parents don't give a shit, Richie," Stan said, not unkindly.

"Sometimes I like to pretend they do."

"I actually have to be home by dark," Eddie said.

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"We can't go to the *playground* right *now*, Georgie."

"Why?"

Becaussse, it's *daytime*. And a *weekend*. There are lotsssss of people *out and about*."

Georgie crossed his lone arm across his chest in a petulant gesture, and It let out a sudden bark of laughter. "Nice *try*, but that doesn't

*quite work.*" This last consonant was sharp, mocking.

If this jab bothered Georgie, he didn't show it. He balled his fist against his thigh. "I'm tired of being cooped up!"

"Then I'll *take* you to the *sewers*."

"It stinks down there, and my feet get wet."

It clicked Its tongue. "My, my," Pennywise giggled. "*Picky.*"

Sinking to one knee, It peered into Georgie's face. His lips and brow were tight with determination, irritation. Such sudden *spine*. Sudden *stubbornness*. Perhaps the child was growing a little too comfortable with It. But, that was what It had wanted to try, wasn't it? It had wanted to see what would happen if It kept a child around for a while. And this was part of growing comfortable, the resistance, the assertiveness. Its nature, of course, rebelled against any response from humans that wasn't fear. It needed fear to survive. Fear was not only the source of Its power, but Its lifeblood. And the latent fear that had always bubbled beneath Georgie's exterior was, at the moment, very, very deeply buried. Leaning close, It put Its nose an inch from Georgie's and inhaled. Yes, the fear ran deep within like an underground stream. It knew It could bring that fear surging back to the forefront. It would be easy. It wouldn't have to lay a finger on him. All It had to do was shape Itself into something out of his nightmares, send them to the sewers with a snap of Its fingers and threaten to take his other arm, turn into Its true form and fill the hallway with Its arachnoid bulk.

But It knew what would happen then. Georgie would cower and snivel and cease asking It for anything. He might even refuse to leave his room. It knew how that story went. Boring. It could give him a little peek of Its deadlights to quiet him up, but same dilemma. Boring. There was more then enough fear in Derry to satisfy It, and more then enough time to savor it.

Pennywise's studious frown smoothed into Its crooked smile. "Let'sss try someplace new, shall *we*?"

Georgie perked up at that. "Where?"

"Hmmmm." It rolled one blue eye to the ceiling and stroked Its chin. Then It snapped Its fingers. "I know." It extended Its hand, wiggling Its fingers. "Come on!"

With an excited grin, Georgie grasped Its hand.

*Pop! Pop!*

The first thing Georgie noticed was that he was now wearing his hat, scarf, jacket, and mittens. The second thing was that he was indoors...ish, but it was drafty. And dim. Sunlight and snowflakes filtered through a large hole in the ceiling right above his head. Georgie approached one dark brick wall and ran his mitten-paw down it, leaving a track. Soot. Blackened, softened boards broke and crumbled under his feet, long fallen from above. Georgie looked down the concrete hallway, empty doorways yawning their shadows, one broken window and another hole in the roof providing sufficient light to see by. Further down, he could see a sagged railing, an indication that he was not on the first floor. In the distance, he heard pattering. The falling of snow or debris, or little rodent feet. He wiped his hand on his pants. He was frightened, but only a little. Just enough to make it fun. A growl rumbled from a space behind him and just over his shoulder, and he darted down the hallway, stumbling over formless lumps of melted metal and plastic, crunching through broken glass bottles and leaping over an abandoned bag of refuse as he went.

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Shortly after It began chasing Georgie, It noticed something interesting on Its periphery. It sent Silver trotting after the boy to keep him busy, and slunk from the Ironworks to investigate. The point of interest was across the Kenduskeag, and past the baseball field, at what the locals had dubbed "Warehouse Row." Not that far, as the crow flew. Its yellow eyes peered from underneath a stack of pallets next to the loading dock of one of these warehouses. The abandoned one. Bill Denbrough and his friends were dismounting their bikes. It knew who these boys were. It had spent enough time around Georgie to drink deep of his thoughts and memories. Its teeth glittered sharp.

Richie let his bike clatter to the cement, while Eddie and Stan set

theirs down more gently. Bill carefully lowered his kickstand, making sure his bike was steady before he walked away. It saw the letters printed on Bill's bike in careful capital lettering: SILVER. Crimson bled around the yellow irises, filling in the pupils. The sound of the boys clambering up onto the loading bay snapped It back to attention.

Eddie immediately grazed his knee. "Shit," he hissed. He bent close to examine the abrasion.

"Aw, does Eds have a booboo?" Richie cooed.

"Piss off."

Bill strode over to the door and gave it a yank. The lock held fast. "D-d-d-damn it." He turned and saw Richie still leaning over Eddie, taunting. Stan was standing awkwardly nearby, tugging at a loose thread in his sleeve. "St-stan, d-do you th-think there's anoth-th-ther d-d-d-door?"

Stan shrugged. "I'm sure, but it will probably be locked too."

Richie and Eddie's argument had risen in volume. Richie was feigning an attempt to kiss Eddie's knee, and Eddie was yelling about the amount of germs carried in saliva.

"C-c-cut it o-out!" Bill barked.

Eddie and Richie fell silent.

"We're looking for another door," Stan announced.

The group jumped down from the loading bay and waded through the hip-high, frosted grass to look for another entrance. Once they were out of sight, It sprouted from the thin shadows under the pallets. Robert Gray smoothed the lapels of Its leather jacket, produced a lighter from Its jeans pocket, and lit the cigarette between Its teeth. With one blink, yellow eyes became blue-green. The lingering unease of the boys drifted on the chill breeze, drawing Its lips into a smirk. It would have some fun with this lot. Nothing fatal, not yet. Let them continue their clumsy crusade to find the youngest Denbrough. That could easily be a goldmine of entertainment. It

would just give them a little spook.

Once the boys had rounded the corner, Bob followed. It could have sent Itself there with a single thought, but It relished the crunch of gravel and hard-packed snow under Its boots, the swish of dead grass against Its jeans. It stopped just out of sight. There was rattling and cursing ahead.

"Well, how the hell are we supposed to get in, then?" Eddie wailed. He was scared and eager for Bill to give up since Georgie was most likely dead already, and if he wasn't, this was business for the cops. Bob grinned. A wise one, Eddie.

"Half these windows are busted out, dipshit," Richie retorted, tension making him snappier than usual.

The smaller one's fear was a perfume on the breeze; It just knew he would be *delicious*. It wiped Its wet mouth with the back of Its hand and leaned against the brick exterior, listening, listening with more than Its ears. One eye rolled sideways. Silence among the group as they searched for a point of entry. The tinkling of broken glass falling when Bill found a busted window and cleared the sill of the remaining shards so the group could safely enter. Eddie's long high note of near-terror as he imagined stumbling upon a grisly scene, disturbing squatters, cutting himself on a rusty nail and falling deadly ill; Richie's quiet misery because *this wasn't funny* and they should be using their weekend to play like the kids they were instead of chasing ghosts; Stan's logical calm losing the battle with his jangling nerves as he watched his friend descend into single-minded obsession, leading them into an abandoned and possibly dangerous warehouse on the slim chance there could be anything relating to his dead brother inside; Bill's grim determination to do whatever it took to find Georgie tamping down the sick dread of actually finding something. It wiped Its mouth again.

They were in the warehouse now, It could see through their eyes like four television screens in Its mind. The boys had entered into what had formerly been some sort of office. Drafty, dirty with litter, graffiti on the walls. As Richie crept toward a rotting mattress and a pile of cardboard boxes, It flicked a finger. An empty beer bottle resting on a rickety table rolled off the edge and shattered. The group collectively

jumped. Eddie let out an embarrassing scream.

Richie was the first to recover, letting out a breathless laugh. "Well, this noble quest is off to a great start."

"I don't like it in here," Eddie muttered. "Not one bit."

"We just got here!"

"There's something fucky about this place."

"Maybe it's the smell of human shit."

Bill advanced toward the door. Someone had spraypainted a cartoon penis onto it, along with several lewd phrases.

Eddie was shaking his head. "I feel like we're being watched."

"You're overreacting."

Stan was quiet.

The doorknob squealed in Bill's hand. He had to give the door a few good tugs to get it to jerk loose of the doorframe. He peered out. A hallway on one side, open doors to the main warehouse floor on the other. Toppled shelving, detached roofing, and all the signs of squatter habitation crowded the floor. This seemed to merit the more immediate investigation. Bill proceeded, soles crunching over grit. Richie followed, warming up to this adventure now. Stan hesitated in the doorway, pinching at his jacket sleeve. Eddie stayed right where he was.

It slunk around the corner, silent, and stood outside the broken window. As Stan edged out into the hallway, It suggested to Eddie that he turn around. Overcome by the sudden feeling of eyes drilling into his shoulder blades, Eddie spun. Robert Gray took the cig from Its mouth and exhaled a cloud of smoke, lips curling into a smile filled with unspoken, sinister promise.

*"Jesus Fuck!"* Eddie shrieked, darting into the hallway. He slammed into Stan and would have sent them both to the ground if Stan hadn't caught his balance against the wall. Eddie grabbed at him blindly.

"Shit!" Stan yelped. "What is it?"

Eddie took Stan's arm and tugged him away from the office, huddling behind the taller boy. "There's someone back there!"

Snorting, Richie swaggered over. "No there's not."

"Yes there fucking is! I saw him! He was standing right there!"

Richie rolled his eyes and moved toward the office.

Eddie clutched Stan tighter.

"Holy shit," Richie whispered.

"What?" Eddie squeaked. "What is it? Oh, Jesus."

"It's..." Richie broke off and gulped.

Bill came over now, concern mounting.

Richie whirled around. "*IT'S FUCKING NOTHING!*"

"I swear to God, there was a creepy motherfucker standing right there! He was staring at me like he wanted to eat my liver!"

With a soft sigh, Bill retreated to search the warehouse floor.

"Maybe... maybe it was just some bum passing by," Stan suggested, gently prying Eddie's fingers from his jacket.

"It wasn't a bum."

"How do you know it wasn't a bum?" Richie arched an eyebrow.

"I... it just wasn't. I could tell."

"You a bum expert now?"

"Whatever," Eddie grumbled. "I know what I saw."

"C-come on, g-g-uys," Bill called.

Squatting against the wall under the window, It pressed a hand over

Its lips as Its body shook with silent laughter.

Richie rejoined Bill, Stan at his back while Eddie stayed close behind. Bill stood in the center of the room, eyes running over discarded warehouse inventory and squatter belongings. Several inches of snow covered everything that wasn't in the furthest corners of the room, courtesy of blown-out windows.

It pinched the cig between Its teeth. The fingers of Its hands grew together, hardening and lengthening into hairy spider arms. It scurried up the wall to look down on the boys from a fist-sized hole in the ceiling.

"So..." Stan yanked at the hem of his jacket. "Do we just start digging through everything? 'Cuz I don't see anything that looks like someone's been living here recently..."

Without answering, Bill marched over to a bulging trash bag and began picking at the knotted string. Eddie cowered behind Stan and Richie, fully expecting to see mangled body parts come spilling out of the bag. But when Bill finally succeeded in undoing the knot and upending the bag, all that fell out were assorted empty bottles of all sorts: plastic, glass, cleaning supplies, beer, water, soda. As Eddie let out a sigh of relief, Bill started on the next bag.

"H-h-help m-me."

Slowly, the other boys moved to begin combing through the debris and garbage. Eddie cleaved close to Richie and they both began to poke through a mound of clothing. Bob scuttled to the other side of the roof, not bothering to be quiet. Dust and clumps of frozen snow rained down. An icicle fell and speared into a cardboard box like a frozen knife.

Eddie grabbed Richie. "Did you guys hear that? There's something up there!"

Richie brushed Eddie's hands away. "It was some ravens or something. They can be really loud."

"Are you insane? That wasn't a couple of birds!"

Richie looked to Stan for help. "Birdman?"

Stan swallowed. "That didn't sound like birds to me."

It thumped to the frozen ground. Now Stan's fear was seeping from his pores to mingle with Eddie's terror and rise into the air like steam from a bath. Bob shook Its spider appendages, flapping them comically as they shrank back down to smooth human hands. Exhaling a cloud of smoke, It paused a moment to enjoy the gray cloud wavering around Its head and the panic spreading among the boys in the warehouse. Richie was trying to put on a brave front, and Bill was starting to catch the fear bug. It took the cig from Its lips and frowned down at Its slender fingers. With a blink of Its eyelids, blue-black bruises blossomed across Its pale knuckles. A minor touch, but a good one. Implied violence.

"I-i-it m-mi-might b-be a... an an-n-n-imal," Bill suggested, not really believing it himself. His hands still held a half-emptied garbage bag, this one full of various cloths and rags.

"I want to get the hell out of here," Eddie said. "I'm not doing this anymore."

Bill gave him a betrayed sort of look that Eddie distinctly did not acknowledge.

Bob sauntered to a wide window that was grayed with dust and cobwebs but mostly intact, and that provided an unobstructed view of the boys. It took another drag.

"You're afraid of a racoon, Eds?" Richie taunted.

"That wasn't a fucking racoon. Racoons are nocturnal, you retard."

Shrugging, Richie said, "Maybe it's sick, like rabies or something."

Eddie's eyes got even rounder. "*I'm leaving!*" He nearly shrieked. "*Right now!*" But he didn't move, more afraid of being caught alone on his way to his bike than facing their unknown stalker with his friends by his side.

They still had not noticed It. It let out a low, obscene wolf whistle.

Each boy's head snapped to the window. The pandemonium was immediate.

"It's him! It's him! I saw him!" Eddie yelled, seizing Richie's elbow in a white-knuckled grip. "That's the fuckin' creep that staring at me!"

"Guys, we should probably go!" Stan was trying his best to keep his voice steady, but he was unable to fully control the wavering in his vowels.

"Just who the fuck do you think you are?!" Richie was screaming over both Eddie and Stan. "The fuck you want, tough guy? Huh? You think you're scary?"

Bill paid no heed to his friends. He was staring at Bob, nostrils flaring as It took a drag, eyes alighting on Its bruised hand as It plucked the cigarette from Its mouth and blew a taunting cloud of smoke in his direction. His jaw quivered: anger, disgust, fear all vying for dominance. In that moment Bill *knew* that he looked upon Georgie's abductor.

"I've taken shits that scared me more than you!" Richie bellowed. He stooped to grab a chunk of brick, and hurled it at Bob.

The missile smashed through the dusty window and whistled past Bob's cheek with an inch to spare. It chuckled. Fight and flight, they both had the same root. Richie's aggression was just as delicious as Eddie's panicked pants and Stan's frantic pleas. Bill was the only one who wasn't fully *marinated* yet, but give him time. He'd ripen soon enough.

It was trying to decide if It would merely give them a little chase back to their bikes or perform a little of Its trickery to set the warehouse on fire (just a small one) when It felt something tickling at a corner of Its awareness. There was some disturbance going on with the little Denbrough, seemed like. Another laugh escaped It, an involuntary whoop. The day was just full of surprises. Putting the cigarette back between Its teeth, It gave the boys a little salute and strolled out of sight. Bill scrambled to the window, but the man was nowhere to be seen.

---

When It transported Itself to the Ironworks, It saw that Georgie was in no real sort of danger. He was just upset about something, his distress magnifying off the walls as he trotted around the charred building with the goat in tow. So It decided to give him a bit of a startle.

"Pennywise? Where are you? Pennywise! Pennywise!"

Still in the form of Robert Gray, It jumped from around a corner and right into Georgie's path. "Boo!"

Georgie squealed and reeled back, arm windmilling as he fought not to trip. He studied Bob for a moment. The rough chuckle, the certain *offness* to the smirk, and there, one eye listing slightly sideways.

"Is... is that you?"

"Is that who?" Bob grinned.

"Pennywise? If this is some sort of joke..."

"Guilty." Licking Its lips, giving the adrenaline-laced air a sniff, It dropped Its immortal cigarette to the ground and crushed it under Its boot.

Georgie's little fist hit Its lower stomach. Bob looked down at him blankly. Georgie hit It again, then kicked Its shin. His face was twisted in anger. "Why did you leave me? That wasn't funny!"

"I, uh, had some stuff to do." It rubbed the drool from Its chin.

"What stuff?"

It twisted and folded on Itself, shifting into the clown. It didn't answer.

Tears welled in Georgie's eyes. He smacked Its arm hard enough to make the little silver bells on Its wrist tinkle. "I thought you'd left me."

"I did."

"I mean for good!"

"Why would you think that?"

"I couldn't find you anywhere. I kept calling and you wouldn't come." Georgie gave a wet snuffle.

"I wasn't gone for that long. I've left you alone for longer."

"Not, not in," he hiccupped, "... a strange place."

"You had Silver here with you." It gestured to the goat.

Georgie shook his head, fresh tears spilling over his cheeks. Face pulling down into a frown, It placed the heel of Its palm against his forehead. Georgie's thoughts were a confused jumble that It struggled to make sense of, but It saw that the boy had feared he had been promptly abandoned with no protector or source of food or shelter, that he had begun to recollect what it felt like to be alone in the dark bowels of the sewers with rainwater and grit up his nose and down his throat and blood and heat leaving his body through his severed arm. Illogical to jump that far, of course, but Georgie's existence and being was becoming increasingly illogical, only natural that his mind would follow suit.

And there was something deeper, something Georgie himself was only vaguely aware of. A simmering, steeping loneliness, a craving for company and companionship that was eating away at his subconscious and coloring his emotions. This was why he had been so angry, then. And it was why he had been so frightened at the prospect of abandonment. And... it was partly why he was eating so little, why his cheekbones and wrists had more edge to them, why his eyes were deeper in his sockets. The other part was naturally, a lack of sunlight and the general stresses that came with living with an interdimensional child-eater.

Letting out a sob, Georgie grabbed the hand on his head, then threw himself against It as he buried his fingers in the frills of Its costume.

"I want to go home," he moaned into Pennywise's stomach.

Its frown deepened, but It did as Georgie requested. They vanished

from the Ironworks without so much as disturbing the sooty dust thick over the floor, and appeared in Georgie's room in 29 Neibolt. Georgie did not release his one-handed grasp on Its poufy waist, nor did he take his face away from where it was pressed against one of Its fluffy red buttons. Pennywise pinched the back of Georgie's jacket and made a gentle attempt to pry him loose. No avail. Georgie was not crying anymore, but he was shaking and his breaths were uneven. Silver stood at Its side, slowly chewing Its cud. It looked upwards and watched a particularly impressive cobweb stir in the faint draft. Again, It tried to remove the kid. In response, Georgie dug his fingers deeper into Its faded costume and practically mashed his face into Its body. It continued to watch the cobweb flutter. It settled Its hands over Georgie's ears, long fingers almost completely enwrapping his skull, and whispered the suggestion of sleep into his mind. Georgie's grip loosened. He drew back from It, the barest bit, and looked up at Its painted face with bleary eyes. He thought that Pennywise looked very serious. Not angry, no, but somber. Not quite concerned. Grim? Sad? Thoughtful? Whatever It was, It was more *that* than he had ever seen It. He reached up and took three of Its fingers in his hand, tugging It over to his messy bed of dirty mattresses and straw. He was suddenly exhausted, too tired to even undress.

"Stay here," Georgie whispered. He tumbled gracelessly onto his bed without letting go of Its hand, and It was forced to squat to oblige the boy.

"You can *let go* of me now, Georgie."

He blinked up at It, eyes round with alarm despite the fatigue creeping through his bones. Was this the longest he had seen It go without cracking a smile? "Don't leave."

It pulled Its fingers away and lightly set them on Georgie's mud-crusted boot. That wasn't good enough for the boy. Georgie took Its hand and set it on his shoulder, where he could feel Its presence, be sure It was still there. It sighed dramatically, but didn't resist.

Georgie's eyes had already closed and his breathing was already slowing when It spoke up.

"Why did you name the goat Silver?"

"Mmmm. Bill's bike."

Its eyes flashed yellow and red, and Its face screwed into a horrible, sharp-toothed grimace. But Its hand on Georgie's shoulder remained soft. Georgie, eyes closed and seconds from unconsciousness, did not see the change in Its expression. And It was still there, squatting by the bed, when Georgie awoke and demanded a peanut butter and jelly sandwich. Its hand was settled flat on Georgie's chest, then – he had shifted around in his sleep.

## 23. Food Chain

A/N: Add more fuel to this powder keg, why not?

Take bets on me finishing this fic before Chapter 2 drops? lolololol

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*December 29th, 1988*

"No fucking way we're going to cocksucking Henry's dad for help. Help we don't even need, may I remind you." Richie shoved his glasses up onto his nose with an angry jab, face pulled down into a frogish frown.

Bill calmly looked up at him from where he was sitting in the fresh four inches of snow on his front lawn, seemingly mindless of the damp soaking into his jeans, and continued molding his handful of snow into a ball.

"Well, we should tell *someone*," Eddie said, flapping his arms. "And I don't think Officer Bowers would blow us off because his son's an asshole. Looking into stuff like this is kind of his job."

"Looking into what? Some creepy dude hanging around an abandoned warehouse? There are dozens of those. He didn't even do anything to us, we have nothing to tell the cops!"

Bill lobbed his snowball into the road and started on another.

"Plus," Richie added, "Officer Bowers is, himself, an asshole."

Eddie sniffed and adjusted his too-big bomber hat.

Stan inserted himself into the argument. "Maybe we don't tell the cops because we don't have anything to report or whatever, but we should talk to an adult about this. Because Eddie's right. We need to tell someone. We might be a little over our heads here."

"Because some bum grinned at us?" Richie scoffed. "What's gotten into you guys?"

"He was *stalking* me!" Eddie screeched. "Like some sort of fucking tiger or something! And he looked pretty clean for a bum. Why would anyone hang around a creepy warehouse for a smoke?"

"He threw something at us, didn't he?" Stan asked. "Like, a brick?"

"That was *me*, Stanley," Richie said. "I threw the brick."

"I thought he threw something," Stan mumbled. "I could have sworn..."

Eddie furrowed his brow and gnawed his lip. "Did he? Bill, do you remember?"

Bill shrugged, frowned, chucked his snowball. "I don't remember him doing anything."

Richie raised his hands and clapped them as loudly as he could with his gloves on. "See? He didn't do anything. We can't call the cops because we saw a bum near a warehouse."

"It wasn't a fucking bum!" Eddie voice rose again.

"And," Richie continued, "we'll get our asses beat if we tell our parents we were poking around an abandoned building. At least, you guys will."

"I'm not comfortable with this," Eddie said. "I think something's up with that dude."

"It was just some guy taking a smoke," Richie said. "A weirdo, sure."

"Then why did you throw the brick at him?" Stan asked.

"Got a little spooked is all, with all you weenies screaming and hollering."

"Something was off about him," Eddie said. "You felt it too."

Richie waved his hand. "Let's not get sidetracked here. No parents, no cops. Cops won't care, parents will only care that we were poking around where we shouldn't, and wouldn't be able to do anything

about Creepy Dude even if they did. Agreed?"

Stan scuffed at the snow with his boot and pulled his cap down further over his ears. "Richie's right. There's nothing any adults could do, and we'd only get into trouble."

Bill stood and dusted his hands off on his jeans. "I don't think we should tell anyone."

"This could be dangerous," Eddie said.

"Dangerous, my ass," Richie spat. "You're overreacting. Nothing happened."

"Maybe something *will* happen!" Eddie snapped.

"Yeah, like what? Some random bastard out for a smoke looks at us again?"

Bill raised his voice. "I'm going to check out the old auto repair shop. Eddie, you don't have to come if you don't want to."

Eddie sniffed and glared over at the neighbor's house, rubbing his runny nose with a mitten.

"I'm not coming," Stan said. At Richie's aghast look, he added, "I won't tell anyone, but I'm not going. This is silly. And my parents will want me to help them get the house ready for their New Year's party."

"C'mon, Eds," Richie pleaded. "Don't tell me you're going to pussy out, too."

Stan didn't rise to the passive-aggressive bait.

Eddie tapped his foot, looked at Richie, looked at Bill, looked out across the street. "Fuck it. Fine. I'll go. But if that skeevy prick shows up again, I'm out."

"See ya, Stan," Bill said.

Stan gave a halfhearted wave as the trio lifted their bikes from the snow, one Bill and Eddie returned but Richie deliberately did not. Stan watched them pedal down the street with a frown.

---

"Whatcha got there, Georgie?"

Georgie lifted his hand. Pinched between his thumb and forefinger was a small, slender tail, and dangling from that tail was a lifeless grey-brown rat. It was young, a juvenile roundness to the skull. The rodent's eyes were shut, its tiny pink tongue protruding slightly past its lips and teeth.

Pennywise folded at the waist to inspect Georgie's prize. One blue eye slid from the rodent to Georgie. Its lips parted in a drooly grin. "Did you *find* it dead, or did you *make* it dead?"

"Found it," Georgie said. It did not detect an attempt at deceit. The situation would have been a little more interesting if Georgie had killed the rat, since he didn't have a violent bone in his body (apart from the occasional temper tantrum, to be expected from children his age). It sensed a growing undertow in the little boy's mind, and how that would reveal itself remained to be seen. Perhaps his fascination with this dead thing was a manifestation of this shift, this melting.

Georgie squinted at It, craned his neck to try to see what It was holding behind Its back. "What do you have?"

Its grin widened and Its eyes brightened. "Oh, I'm so glad you asked." With a flourish, It withdrew a half-chewed arm that was missing a few fingers. "Voila."

Georgie studied the limb being waved in front of him.

"You're hungry," It said. It could sense the boy's stomach pinching on itself, despite the peanut butter and jelly sandwich (which It had pilfered from some poor Derry denizen's table) that he had inhaled a few hours before. The boy's appetite had been increasing the past few days. Yet another oddly-shaped piece to this puzzle. "You can either eat that dusty rat, or you can share with me."

After a moment's delay, Georgie met Its gaze with an impish smirk. It wondered what it would be like to feed dear old Billy to his younger brother. Wouldn't *that* be a hoot? But then again, Bill was the one leading his friends around Derry on their foolish search for Georgie,

and that was turning out to be good fun to watch. If Bill left the picture, they'd stop. He was the one that lit the fire under their asses, he was the one that put the blinders next to their eyes and kept them focused on Georgie, Georgie, Georgie. If not for Bill, Eddie and Stan and Richie would have forgotten about the missing boy almost completely.

As Georgie leaned forward and clamped his teeth on one of the hand's few remaining fingers, It decided to save brother-breakfast for when It got bored, either with watching Bill and his band of dorks running around and moaning about Georgie, or when It got tired of taking care of the child. Whichever came first.

It had wondered, as It had squatted next to Georgie's sleeping form, one hand resolutely planted on his shoulder, if he would meet the same fate as Susan. The parallels were there. Two kids, snatched from aboveground. Taken down to the sewers, shown the circus. Fed and cared for. Kept. Guarded while they slept. Perhaps, one day, Georgie would go the same way as Susan. He still had a simple child's mind, a simple child's fears. But eventually he would grow familiar with It, no longer fear It. What would happen then? Would he challenge It? Defy It?

Pennywise snorted. No child, no *human* had ever brushed off Its manifestations of their deepest fears and dreads – It suspected the human mind and nature made this almost impossible – and no one-armed, half-sane, bite-sized eight year-old was going to give It pause. There was enough fear going around in Derry to keep Its strength up as long as It went out and stretched Its legs regularly. The only concern It needed to have was stocking Its pantry.

Georgie peeked up at Its slack, cross-eyed face. He swallowed a hunk of tendon and flesh, coughing, almost choking. "What are you thinking about?"

With a jerk, the clown's eyes refocused on the boy. It grinned. "Oh, just *zoning out*." It plucked the rat from Georgie's fingers, opened Its gaping maw, and dropped the rodent onto Its tongue. It swallowed, bones cracking audibly as the pest slid down Its throat.

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"Maybe we'll find a dead body in a trunk," Richie chirped.

Wincing, Eddie snarled, "Beep, beep. God."

Chastened, Richie shoved his glasses up on his nose and propped his bike against the chain link encircling the mostly-empty lot. Bill carelessly dropped Silver's kickstand and strode down the cracked sidewalk, toward the padlocked gate. Eddie rested his own bike next to Richie's, noticed Silver tottering, and snagged the handlebars of Bill's bike before it could crash to the ground. Once Eddie had righted Bill's bike, he and Richie joined Bill at the gate. Bill had already pushed the gate as far open as the chain and padlock would allow, and was worming his slim frame through the gap.

Only a half-dozen cars in various states of disrepair occupied the weedy gravel lot. The squat, concrete office's one window was broken. The steel rollup door of the warehouse had stuck a few inches off the ground.

Richie let out a string of curses as his glove caught on an errant twist of chain link on his way through the gate. He wiggled the finger of his opposite hand through hole, shrugged.

"So, uh.." Eddie wrung his hands as best he could with his mittens. "What do we check first?"

Bill surveyed the dead weeds poking through the dusting of snow, the sparrows congregating on the top of the office, the rust speckling the warehouse and the cars. He strode over to a faded red pickup truck that was sitting on jacks and missing one side mirror. Eddie and Richie glanced at each other, followed. Bill stood on tiptoe to peek into the trunk. Bottles, wrappers, and a rubber glove. Richie clambered up the scratched hood to look down through the sun roof as Eddie framed his face with his hands and squinted through the passenger window. The seats had been chewed up by various pests, and the radio was missing. No Georgie.

Bill abandoned the truck and moved on to the next vehicle, this one a sedan with its front half crunched from an accident. The driver's side door lay on the ground, and there were some blankets on the backseat, but these were stiff, coated in dirt and dust and bird shit.

Not recently used, not touched in months at least. Bill tried to open the trunk and found it locked.

"Wanna find something to smash it open with?" Richie asked.

Eddie opened his mouth to protest, but closed it.

Bill chewed the inside of his cheek. "N-n-n-no. I-i-i-f-f w-we c-c-a-n-n't guh-get i-it uh-open, n-n-neith-ther wuh-wuh-would h-h-he."

Richie nodded.

"P-p-p-plu-us," Bill added, "I-I'm n-not s-s-sure h-how st-str-strong yuh-you are, R-R-Richie..."

"Yeah, ok, attack me for trying to help."

Bill let a small smirk quirk his lips before he walked over to another truck.

Rattling at the fence caught Eddie's attention, and he groped for Richie's shoulder with a startled gasp.

Stan waved from the sidewalk. "Hey, guys."

Richie brushed Eddie's hand off. "Well hi there, Stanley. I was wondering when you were going to join us."

Stanley yanked the zipper of his jacket down, then up, down, then up. "Yeah, well. Couldn't let you morons get tetanus or run into a rabid guard dog."

"Tetanus?" Eddie squeaked.

Richie adopted a southern drawl. "Ma'am, calm down. You're wearing mittens. You'll be fine."

"Listen, dying from lockjaw isn't fun, ok?"

"Neither is living your life in constant dread."

"Ok, ok, I didn't mean to start a bicker between the lovely couple," Stan said as he shimmied through the gate.

Richie and Eddie both sneered at him.

This second truck yielded nothing but more trash, rust, and animal damage. Without hesitation, Bill headed for the office. Richie followed close at his heels, with Eddie and Stan a little bit behind. The door was, predictably, locked. Richie trotted around to the side of the office, grasped the window ledge, and launched himself through the empty frame where a windowpane once had been. His sneakers crunched on broken glass.

Eddie yelped, "Be careful!"

Without hesitation, Bill also clambered into the building. Stan looked at Eddie, shrugged, and hopped onto the ledge.

"If I have to get stitches, I'm fucking killing all of you," Eddie muttered, taking Stan's proffered hand.

As the boys poked through garbage accumulated in the corners, miscellaneous papers left in dented and rusted filing cabinets, knickknacks in desk drawers, Robert Gray watched from the sidewalk. A thin tendril of smoke rose lazily from Its cigarette, and Its eyes glowed yellow. It smiled.

From the office, a door led into the shop. This door was not locked. Bill flung it wide to reveal a dim space lit by the sunlight that filtered through the dusty windows set high on the walls. Two large car lifts loomed over the floor. Needles and makeshift pipes littered the ground. Expletives and cartoons engaging in various indecent acts had been spray painted on the walls. Two dirty mattresses rested near the walls. These, however, were not dusty. And the boots set neatly next to one mattress, although having clearly seen better days, were not old or rat-chewed. The wrappers piled in a corner were shiny and new.

"Uh, guys," Eddie whispered. "I think someone lives here. Or a couple someones. Like, *currently*."

Nostrils flaring, Bill took several steps, the remnants of a glass pipe crunching under his shoe.

"Bill," Stan hissed. "We should go back."

"Wuh-wuh-what i-i-if-f th-they h-h-had s-s-suh-some-thing to do w-w-with..." Bill broke off, clenching his jaw with a frustrated growl.

"Well, I don't see anyone here." Richie made a show of looking around, scanning the small stack of tires, the paint-splattered workbench, the empty tool rack on one wall. "Looks like no one's home."

Bill stood, clenching and unclenching his hands. Stan watched Bill's fingers work, knowing that if there was anything present for Bill to tear through for signs of his brother, he would, and a tension – no, a sense of doom, of danger looming overhead

(Robert slithered from floorboard of the crunched sedan, cigarette still dangling from Its smirking lips)

like a massive wave about to break over Stan and carry him tumbling under the surface

(Robert brushed dirt from Its leather jacket and swaggered toward the shop)

began to rise in his body, starting somewhere around his belly button and ascending, cold, up to his throat. Stan looked over at Eddie and saw that Eddie felt it too, or something like it. Eddie's eyes were wide, his lips parted, breath coming in fast little gasps. Eddie's wide brown eyes rolled in his head to meet Stan's. Yes, Eddie felt it – *knew* it – too. Bill was blinded by his determination to find Georgie, Richie blinded by his complete fucking ignorance, his inability to take anything even slightly fucking seriously, and Stan knew now that he was *meant* to come, he *had* to come, because they needed to get out of there before something truly awful happened, and Eddie sure as shit wasn't going to do anything.

As if on cue, Eddie gulped and whispered, "Uh, guys..."

"We need to get the fuck out of here right now." Stan said, in his best projection, something picked up from years of watching Mr. Uris speak before his congregation. Stan's voice boomed in the large space

with something akin to authority.

Richie blinked at him. Bill nearly gaped. Eddie flinched.

"Did I fucking stutter?" Stan demanded, wincing as he said it. But Bill seemed not to notice, or if he did, not to take offense.

"Jesus, and you guys tell me *I'm* insensitive," Richie said.

"There's nothing to see here," Stan continued. "And we need to go before the pair of meth heads that lives here comes back."

"B-b-but wuh-wuh-what i-i-if-f..."

"We can tell the police that people are squatting here if you think it has any connection to Georgie." Sweat was crawling its itchy way down Stan's spine, and the urge to get as far away from the abandoned lot as possible was so strong that he was afraid he might vomit.

"But we'll get in trouble for trespassing –"

"Then call in a fucking anonymous tip! I don't give a shit!"

Cowed, Richie shuffled back into the shop. Bill hesitated.

"C'mon, Bill," Eddie said, gesturing toward the doorway. "There's nothing here."

Bill cast one last look at the mattresses, let out a shaky sigh, and left the shop.

Stan was checking that the door was closed the door firmly behind them when he heard Richie's voice, outside the office already, rising in a holler of glee: "Well look who we have here!"

Stan's stomach clenched. *Jesus, no.* His fingers remained firmly around the door handle, as if frozen.

"It's that fucking guy again!" Eddie screeched.

With an awkward, wrenching movement, Stan turned. He saw Eddie,

cowering near a desk. He saw Bill, mouth opening and closing, seemingly unsure if he should be afraid or challenging. He saw Richie, standing just outside the window, hands on his hips, haughty. And then he saw *the man*, in the same jeans and leather jacket, standing just ten feet from Richie, cigarette in his lips. And then, Stan remembered. He remembered the footsteps skittering on the warehouse roof, the malicious smirk, Richie screaming and throwing the brick, all of them infected with some sort of primal fear that sucked all logic from their minds. The man's gaze appeared fixed on all of them at once, wide and unblinking. He exhaled a cloud of smoke around the cigarette.

"Whatcha doing here, Mister, huh?" Richie asked. "You in the habit of smoking around dirty, bum-infested, abandoned buildings?"

"Richie," Stan tried to call, but it came out as a strangled croak, too quiet for anyone to hear.

But the man's eyes fixed on him, briefly, pupils widening, before he went back to watching them all.

A distant part of Stan's mind recognized that he was very close to pissing himself.

"You deaf or something?" Richie stepped a little closer to the man.

Teeth grit in decision, Bill clambered through the window to stand next to Richie. Even Eddie moved to support his friend, gingerly crawling over the windowsill although his fingers trembled where they clutched at the frame. Stan still could not move, could not speak, could barely breathe.

"Guys," Stan mouthed.

Now one eye flicked toward Stan, for only a fraction of a second. The others didn't seem to notice. Stan thought he might shit himself, instead of just pissing himself.

"Maybe he's just slow." Eddie seemed to have found some courage, now that they faced this stranger out in the open, and he had shown no response to Richie's provocations.

"Hey." Richie snapped his fingers in front of the man's face. "Anyone home in there?"

The man slowly looked down at Richie. He exhaled another cloud of smoke.

"D-d-duh-do y-you know wh-who luh-luh-lives he-here?"

The man's eyes slid to Bill, but he did not answer.

"Well? Do you or don't you?"

The stranger's gaze remained fixed on Bill.

If there was one thing Richie could not tolerate, it was being ignored (and It knew this, very well).

"Listen here, buddy." Richie stepped up to the man, rose on tiptoe, and snagged the lapels of the leather jacket. With a heave, he yanked the man down to eye level.

A wordless keening sound rose from Stan's throat. His terror galvanized him now, and he flailed through the window, kicking broken glass and stumbling onto the gravel. Neither his friends nor the man paid any attention to his racket.

"You don't look retarded, or drugged-out. My friend asked you a question."

The man's pale green eyes seemed to not be looking at Richie, but through him, into him. His cigarette was dangerously close to slipping from his slack lips. He made no move to take Richie's hands from his jacket. The man continued to stare, unblinking. A cloud of smoke drifted into Richie's face, and Richie realized that the cloud did not smell, nor did it sting his eyes. His fingers loosened slightly on the man's jacket. Five seconds passed. Ten. Stan reached out and rested his hand on the back of Eddie's neck, on his scarf. If something happened, Stan would grab him and run. Leave the braver and more capable Bill and Richie to contend with the man or save themselves as they chose.

A smile spread across the man's face, wider and wider until he was

grinning broadly. The cigarette tumbled to the ground. A chuckle bubbled from his throat, growing into a whooping laugh.

Stan's knees nearly buckled, and he tightened his hold on Eddie's scarf.

"Wuh-wuh-where's Juh-Juh-Georige!"

Giggling, the man licked his lips. "What makes you think I know?"

Now Eddie piped up. "Do you know something or not, you creep?"

"Hmmm." The man rolled his eyes skyward. "*Mayyyybeee.*"

"It's just some nut," Stan whispered. "Let's..."

Richie gave the man a shake. "Stop fucking around and just tell us –"

"Tell you what?" The man hissed, eyes aglow with malicious glee. "That Bill's dear little brother is moldering under three feet of dirt? That he's trapped in a dark basement somewhere, wondering when he'll be rescued? That he's living with another family five states away, already forgetting about his older brother?"

With a scream of rage, Bill lunged at the man. The man snapped upright, easily yanking out of Richie's hold and weathering Bill's kicks and punches with raucous laughter. Richie grabbed at the man's arm, attempting to drag him down. Eddie pulled away from Stan's weak grasp and screeched, "What the fuck is wrong with you?"

Stan's limbs were full of ice, his head light. The others were determined to stay here, to doom themselves. He could do nothing else, his strength had evaporated the moment the man had appeared. He was turning to leave, to abandon his friends to whatever *thing* they were so dead-set on confronting in this abandoned gravel lot, when a yell broke over the sound of their confrontation.

"Well, what in the absolute fuck do we have here?"

Henry and his gang hopped over the chain link fence, all smiles and darkly glittering eyes. For the moment, Bill and Richie's attack on the man stopped. The man's laughter quieted to soft chuckles.

"You faggots beating up on some homeless dude? Huh? *Bullying* him? Tied of getting your own shit shoved in?" Henry put his hands on his hips. "Perhaps you need someone to teach you guys a lesson about abusing those who can't defend themselves." Still grinning, Henry's gaze fixed on the stranger, who was gently but quite firmly extricating himself from Richie's grasp. "Who the fuck are you?"

"Nobody," the man said, grinning himself, as if this were some private joke. He looked over Henry's shoulder, at the hunched and lanky Patrick Hockstetter, and winked. Patrick fidgeted with the case of beer he was holding.

This did not escape Henry's notice. "What are you, some sorta queer?"

Somberly, the man said, "Yes, riddled with AIDS. I think I may soon shit my liver out."

Henry blinked. Eddie shuffled back until he bumped into Stan.

"If you'll excuse me..." The man bowed at the waist with a flourish, then walked past Bowers and his gang.

"Duh-duh-don't luh-let h-h-him gu-get a-aw-away!" Bill made to follow, but Henry closed in, his lackeys following suit.

"Uh, uh, uh. Not so fast."

Richie tried to dodge around and pursue the man, but Belch caught him by the collar and threw him into Bill, fleshy face sneering. "Not so fast, four-eyes."

"Four-eyes? What are you? Ten?"

The next thing Richie knew, he was staring up at the bright afternoon sky, blood filling the back of his throat. Belch wiped his hand on his jacket, feigning disgust.

Eddie rushed to help him up, face twisted into a snarl. "That creep knew something about Georgie?"

"Oh yea?" Henry scoffed. "Is that why you guys were trying to beat his ass?"

Stan peered around the group, and the man had disappeared. He let out a gushing sigh of relief. He'd take a dozen wedgies from Henry, a dozen armlocks, a dozen wet willies, gladly.

"Yuh-yuh-you n-n-need t-to t-t-tell yuh-your d-d-d-dad t-t-t-to -"

"Spit it out!" Victor snapped, swiping his white-blonde hair from his eyes.

"Go tell your fucking cop father that this motherfucker knows something about Georgie! The guy you just let get away!" Richie punctuated this by spitting blood near Belch's shoe.

Belch shoved Richie, would have sent him to the ground again if Eddie hadn't been still holding him.

Henry's eyes narrowed. He looked over his shoulder, saw the man was gone. He took in Bill and Richie's frantic energy, Eddie's jitteriness, Stan's pale and sickly pallor. A faint, dim fear that he might have seriously fucked up took root. But he'd be damned if he admitted defeat in front of these little snots. Henry bent down so he was eye level with Bill and jabbed him in the chest with his finger. "You and your pals should just go ahead and get your asses out of here."

Stan could have wept. *Thank God.* It was all he could do to keep pace with his friends and not sprint ahead of them to the gate. They picked up their bikes.

"Should we split up and look for the guy?" Richie asked.

"Nuh-nuh-no. H-he's guh-guh-gone. Fuh-fuh-for n-n-now."

Once they were out of sight of the auto shop, Eddie spoke up. "So now what?"

"Wuh-uh-we k-k-keep luh-looking."

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A/N: I've always wondered what it would be like to have It, the Losers, and the bullies all in one spot. Good chance this won't be the last time.

## 24. Turf War

A/N: Writing Henry is a ton of fun.

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*December 29, 1988 cont.*

Henry watched the little losers wiggle through the gap in the gate and pick up their bikes. Quickly, like they thought he might change his mind and chase after them. Good.

"Uh, Henry?" Victor tried, hesitantly.

"Shut up. Let me think." Henry squinted at the boys' backs as they pedaled away - the smallest and wimpiest one casting a worried glance over his shoulder.

Who the fuck had that guy been? And why the hell had the Stutter and his lame friends been trying to beat his ass? They'd nearly jumped at Henry, too. The obnoxious one - Richie - would occasionally give Henry some backtalk, and he'd always been quick to put the faggot back in line. But Eddie never made a peep. Something stunk. Henry wrinkled his nose for good measure.

Belch cleared his throat. "Henry? What's -"

"I said shut the fuck up."

He'd heard his father complaining about the "shitshow" that ensued because the fuckin' janitor had, in a drunken stupor, thought he'd seen the missing Denbrough boy on school grounds – with a clown, of all things. Officer Bowers seemed more upset about the inconvenience it had caused than the false hope it had given the family. Although the old man had complained plenty about that, too. Henry knew that there was still an ongoing investigation into Ed Jacobson's claims, and the missing kid as a whole. No body had been found, although at this point it was doubtful he was still alive. In such a small and godforsaken town, what were the odds that a stranger would come, scope it out, and snatch a child, all unnoticed? Slim. As his father said. Which meant Georgie had probably been

taken by someone who lived in Derry, or was a frequent visitor there, maybe a resident from a nearby area. But Henry *knew* he'd never seen that man before. His brow furrowed.

Henry sniffed and spat on a wad of saliva onto the snow. "Listen here, lads." Belch, Victor, and Patrick leaned forward. "I think something fucky is going on. With that guy the twerps were kicking, in particular. Any of you seen him before?"

They all shook their heads.

"Yeah, me neither." Henry glanced back at the road. "He sure took off quick, didn't he?"

Patrick flicked his lighter on, then off. On, then off. "Ayuh. Kinda, like, vanished."

"Yeah, he tore ass out of here quick," Victor said.

"Well, maybe..." Belch screwed his face in thought. "Maybe I have seen him before. Not sure, now."

"Yeah..." Victor scratched the back of his head.

"How big is this town?" Henry swept an arm around. "How many people here do you think not a one of us knows?"

Victor kicked the thin layer of snow from the gravel at his feet, long white-blonde hair hiding his eyes. Belch stifled a burp. Patrick studied his lighter.

"I think the odds are pretty fuckin' slim, brothers." Henry studied his friends, jaw set, gears spinning at full speed. When he thought about it, really thought about it, Officer Bowers had been bitching about various missing kids for months. He couldn't recall a case that hadn't gone cold. Surely that had to be an anomaly for such a boring town. "Now, I'm not saying that dear old Derry has become some kid-fucker's hunting grounds. I'm just saying, it's a little *odd*." Henry felt a familiar aggression building in his chest, like when he caught Patrick trying to sneak one of his cigarettes from his glove box.

Victor, Belch, and Patrick met Henry's hard gaze. Henry looked at

them for a long minute, then turned toward the fence and the empty stretch of road beyond it. "Just keep an eye out."

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"Keep looking?" Stan parroted. "Like, right now? Keep looking right now?"

"Y-y-yes-s." Bill set his jaw and put on a fresh burst of steam. He didn't need to refer to the crumpled map in his back pocket. He knew where he was headed next. Richie, Stan, and Eddie pedaled faster to avoid being left behind.

"What if... we run into... that creep?" Eddie panted. Shit like this put him a few degrees from an asthma attack.

"I-I duh-duh-don't..." Bill paused to take in a few gasps, "... th-th-thu-think h-h-he's gu-gon-na st-sti-st -"

"That gangly motherfucker probably took off," Richie finished. He stood up on his pedals, chest inflated. "I bet a stiff wind could blow him over."

"You don't have much room to talk, yourself," Stan said.

Richie continued on, "We could have whooped his ass if Henry and his little bitches hadn't shown up."

"I dunno..." Eddie licked his lips. "He didn't seem very scared of us. He seemed to think it was funny."

"Because he's crazy! All kiddie-snatchers are." Richie rolled his eyes.

"It's because we're kids!" Stan argued. "A grown-ass man isn't going to be afraid of us!"

Richie sneered over his shoulder. "We outnumber that faggot four to one."

"Richie!" Stan also rose to his feet on his pedals, leaning over his handlebars for emphasis. "He didn't even bat an eye!"

"He absolutely did not give a fuck," Eddie agreed. "I think he might

have actually laughed at you."

"Us," Richie sighed. He noticed that Bill had not joined in on the argument. "Where are you taking us, dear leader?"

"Th-th-the I-i-r-ronw-wuh-works-s."

"Oh," Eddie breathed out on a quavery exhale. "Great."

The padlock on the gate to the burned-out Ironworks had long ago been smashed open by ruffians; one of the doors to the gate fallen from its hinges and almost hidden by the thin layer of snow. Stan had the odd thought that the warehouse itself somehow resembled a squat, dark creature crouching on the lot and ready to pounce, its many empty windows like so many eyes, the piping scattered outside the building like so many limbs. He shuddered.

Eddie surveyed the Ironworks with about as much enthusiasm as Stan, worrying his bottom lip between his teeth. With a long-suffering groan, he set his bike on the snow. "Let's just get this over with so we can get the hell out of here."

"I dunno." Richie wrinkled his nose at the building. "Not sure what your problem is. Looks better than my place."

"I'm with Eddie." Stan hastily lowered his bike to the ground. "Let's hurry this up."

Bill's nostrils flared, but he could hardly blame his friends. The bizarre and unsettling second encounter with *whoever that man was* had left them all shaken. He could feel a tight golf ball of panic sitting right behind his navel, buzzing with quiet electricity, sparking up to his fingers and making them shake. It might be a few hours, but a meltdown was inevitable. Even Richie was hiding his unease behind a false façade of bravado and dry wit. Bill lowered his kickstand. "Cuh-cuh-come o-on."

"If I get black lung, I'll kick your ass," Eddie said.

The doors to the warehouse were open, held ajar by football-sized rocks. The tinkle of snowflakes falling through the gaps in the roof and the creaks of the worn building's settling sounded like the noises

of a live thing. Eddie tucked himself behind Richie, who was not shy about positioning himself behind Bill. Stan was more than happy to bring up the rear. Not much material remained in the warehouse, everything valuable having been hauled off after the bodies had been taken away post-explosion. Lots of open floor, empty rooms, and bare catwalks, apart from the debris from the roof. Not many places to hide a child.

Bill cupped his gloved hands to his mouth. "Juh-juh-GEORGIE!"

Richie, Eddie, and Stan all started. Eddie grabbed at Richie's arm. A trio of ravens exploded from a catwalk and flapped through a hole in the roof.

"Jesus, Bill," Eddie gasped.

Bill waited, but only silence answered him.

"I'm guh-guh-gonna luh-look a-ar-round." Bill began to work his way into the warehouse flood, boots crunching on broken beer bottles.

Richie, Eddie, and Stan looked at each other.

Richie shrugged. "If we help him, we get done sooner."

Stan blew out a cloudy breath. "Can't argue with that."

Bill's footsteps revealed the blackened warehouse floor beneath the thin layer of snow, leaving a dark trail behind him. The others followed suit, fanning out through the facility, always keeping at least one boy in sight. They poked around ruined conveyer belts, busted crates, collapsed walls. There was very little sign of more permanent squatters; the grim history of the Ironworks hung over the place like a physical, prickly pall, and enough of the structure was damaged that there was little protection from the elements. At most, the Ironworks was a secluded location for junkies to shoot up or adventurous high schoolers to sip pilfered beers and tell ghost stories. The boys found a handful of discarded liquor bottles, cigarettes, and needles, but not much else.

"Have you guys noticed that we seem to just be on a squatter sightseeing tour lately?" Richie piped up from what had once been

some sort of manager or overseer office.

"Well, I imagine there would be some crossover there with child-snatchers," Eddie replied

Stan cut a sideways look at Eddie, one Eddie didn't catch. Somewhere along the way, it seemed, Eddie had fallen in with Bill's convictions that Georgie had been taken by the strange man they kept running into. If Stan had to pick a stance, he would say that there was definitely something creepy about the guy, but... Stan glanced at the top of Richie's head, just visible over a crumbling brick wall. Did Richie also believe that the man had Georgie stashed away somewhere? Or that he had killed Georgie and stuck around to taunt them? Considering what Stan knew of child predators, he wasn't sure which was worse.

Stan was pulled from his thoughts by a holler of excitement from Richie. "Guys! Guys! Get over here!" Richie beckoned wildly around the wall. Everyone gathered to peer over Richie's shoulder at the set of small boot prints. And right next to them, the tracks of some sort of large dog.

"It could be any kid..." Stan started.

Eddie snorted. "What kind of kid is going to come out to a shithole like this?"

"What do you think, Bill?" Richie asked. "Do those look like Georgie's shoes to you?"

"I-I-I... muh-muh-maybe. I-i-it's-s th-the r-r-ruh-right s-s-s-size."

Gesturing at the canine prints, Richie asked, "What's up with that? Think he got himself some sort of noble doggie companion?"

"Could be some stray dog that came through here before or after," Stan suggested. This they seemed to agree with.

"Luh-luh-let's-s fuh-follow th-th-them."

And so they did. The prints meandered around the factory, up stairs and through dilapidated rooms. Then they stopped, as if the maker

had vanished into thin air.

"What the fuck?" Richie screwed up his face and turned in a circle, looking for the trail to start up again.

"Where the hell could he have gone?" Eddie leaned out an adjacent window, checking for disturbed snow at the bottom.

"Guys..." Stan pointed, finger following Bill's fixed gaze.

The trail ended at what Richie and Eddie had taken to be large smudges. But upon closer inspection, it became clear what they were: very large shoe prints.

Eddie's wide eyes rolled in their sockets, first to Richie, then to Stan, then to Bill. "You know what those look like to me?"

"Cuh-cuh-clown sh-sh-shoes." Eyes misting, Bill brought a gloved fist to his mouth. Whether to hold back a scream or a sob, he wasn't sure.

Stan breathed out a shaky exhale.

Richie shoved his glasses up onto his nose. "What. The. Fuck."

---

It had vanished from sight in the brief second when no eyes were on Robert Gray, while Henry and his lackeys blocked Bill and Co.'s path. Materializing in the garage, It flattened Its arachnid body to the cement and watched the ensuing argument through the gap at the bottom of the garage door, muffling Its chittering laughter, completely unnoticed by the seven humans hardly fifteen yards from It.

Oh, It excelled at being sneaky. Its entire existence hinged on remaining in the shadows, unseen by Derry at large, unnoticed by the cursed Turtle or any of his *cohorts*. That was part of what made Its romps through Derry so much goddamn fun, what made the terror on people's faces so delicious, part of why It couldn't resist playing with Its food. Being noticed, being recognized, being feared after decades asleep...

Letting out a staccato snort, It shook Itself violently, blurring from

crabbish spider to clown to Robert to mangy dog to an unintelligible mass – a canine forelimb, several human arms with too many fingers, a hairy spider leg, a blueish-green fin; a bright yellow iris with a slitted pupil, an empty eye socket dripping congealed blood and maggots, a blind and cloudy-white orb, the dark and rolling eyeball of an enraged horse; a patch of silvery scales, leprous flesh, soft and pale and slug-like skin, sparse fur over patchy hide. With a final shudder, It was back to crab-spider monstrosity.

It had never thought along those lines before. Best not to.

It turned one bulbous yellow eye to the pair of mattresses against the wall. They seemed recently used. Its mandibles scissored, rasping together like knives.

"... get your asses out of here," Henry snapped. It pressed Its head close to the crack again and saw Bill and his friends storming off.

A gravelly bastardization of a chuckle seeped from Its throat. Victor cast a curious glance over his shoulder. But even if he could have seen the black thing spying on them from the shadows of the garage, It was already gone.

Georgie was startled from his nap by the sound of Its cackles filling the house. His head throbbed and his throat was dry. He was so hungry his stomach hurt. How long had he been asleep? It was hard to tell, lately. He'd become prone to drifting off to sleep at random times. Sometimes he felt like he wasn't always waking up on the same day. But he felt like he'd gone to sleep hungry, this time at least. Silver in tow, Georgie stumbled down the stairs, through the living room to the door leading to the basement. It was ajar. Georgie hesitated for only a moment, stroking Silver's coarse back absently, before he descended into the darkness.

Although he couldn't see anything, he could hear It, Its loud guffaws echoing around the damp space with enough strength to make his ears ring. His hand groped out and found one of Silver's knobby horns. As if sensing his thoughts (which Georgie knew It could), Its laughter quieted into snorting giggles.

"What... what's so funny?" Georgie managed around a tongue that felt

like a wad of cotton.

"Oh..." A pair of yellow eyes appeared suspended in the darkness, melting into piercing blue. "Humans are so *interesssting*."

"Yeah. I guess so." Georgie fought a sudden and brief wave of dizziness, clutching Silver's horn like a cane.

The eyes came closer, and a ruby red mouth joined them. The pupils widened, one eye straying to the side. "You don't feel so good."

"No."

"Hm. I... *might* have forgotten to feed you breakfast. *And* lunch."

"It's alright," Georgie said, reflexively. What else was there to say? He couldn't exactly scold the creature. "Only... I don't think it's so good for me to miss meals like that." He swallowed, painfully.

"Of course, of course." The mouth stretched into a toothy smile, and with a *pop!* Georgie was sitting at the dusty kitchen table. He was still holding Silver tightly. On the table sat a perspiring pitcher of water, a glass, a fork, and a plate piled with mashed potatoes, peas, and some sort of meat.

The clown stepped through the doorway, gesturing with one slender hand. "Bon Appétit."

Georgie downed the glass of water in greedy gulps before he poked at the meat with his fork. "What is it?" he asked, knowing full well he was hungry enough to eat it regardless.

Pennywise sniffed. "Goat."

Georgie cast a horrified glance toward Silver, who was unconcernedly chewing its cud.

Pennywise gave a short bark of laughter. "It's meatloaf. The kind you like."

The kind Georgie liked was made by his mother, but It didn't want to mention that. The clown perched on the filthy kitchen counter, knees

drawn up to Its chest and peaked orange hair brushing the cabinets, and watched Georgie eat with uncanny intensity. He didn't seem to mind the scrutiny. The boy cleared his plate without a fuss, which It noticed. There had been a time when he would have left the peas in a little mound, even if he was still hungry.

Its chin dropped, and It stared at him from under Its brows. A thin line of drool seeped from Its bottom lip to patter on the linoleum. "Georgie."

"Hm." Georgie was chasing the last few peas with his fork, and did not look up.

"What's your *favorite* food?"

"Uh." Georgie struggled to lift the pitcher with one arm. Stepping from the counter in one lithe movement, Pennywise lifted the pitcher with one finger and filled his glass. "I don't know." Georgie took a sip. "I guess I don't really have one."

"Ah, I *sssssee*." It hopped onto the kitchen table, faced the wall, and squatted there, swiping Its tongue across Its lips. Georgie *should* have said popcorn. Or peanut butter and jelly. Or pasta. The reigning champion rotated around, but it was always one of those.

"Georgie." One blue eye found him. "What did that taste like, just now?"

Georgie shrugged. "I dunno."

Pennywise scowled and pulled a trick It had seen in his mind during one of Its many trips there. "George Elmer."

He sighed. "Like, I guess, bread. Plain bread. Or plain toast."

For a long time after that, It was quiet, thousand-yard gaze directed at the wall. Georgie scratched the spot between Silver's horns. Pennywise came back to life with a sudden shaking of Its bells. It pivoted to face the child.

"What do you say to some fresh air?!"

Georgie looked at the paper-covered windows. "Is it dark yet?"

"Close enough."

A small smile curved Georgie's lips. "Sure."

Its white-gloved hand clapped onto his head and then they were in the auto lot, the bullies gone just a few minutes previous, a mere four blocks down the road. Robert giggled. Oh, little did dear Billy know. Georgie took in the winter clothes that had appeared on his body (all quite dirty by now and in real need of a washing), the dilapidated office, the garage, the decomposing cars.

"I think I know this place."

"I'm sure you do."

"Why are you a normal person?"

It had walked over to where the snow had been disturbed by Its *altercation* with Bill and his friends. It placed Its feet in the prints, whirling about in some sort of dance. "Sometimes, I like to *change* things up." Robert smirked and winked one of Its green-grey eyes at him.

Georgie sensed some deeper meaning there, but didn't feel like figuring it out. While It continued whatever It was doing, he wandered over to a rusty truck.

What It was doing was thinking about how Georgie seemed to be losing his taste for food, and what that might mean for his wellbeing. What other functions might the child lose? What other functions might he *gain*? Robert cast a thoughtful glance at Georgie; the only thing visible of him was his mud-crusted boot sticking from the window of the truck. Who could say what effects might arise from a mortal human child sharing space with an immortal cosmic being for an extended period of time?

And the drama with Billy, oh, that was turning out to be great fun. It could still taste the lingering terror from Stan and Eddie on the air, Bill's trepidation over what he might have found in the lot, Richie's fear that his friend was losing his grip on sanity. Rob inhaled through

Its mouth, letting the air flow over Its tongue. Wild grin spreading across Its face, It executed a whirling pirouette and ended in an arabesque, foot and hand pointed toward the grey sky. As the first flake fell onto Its nose, It let out a low, deep chuckle that didn't condense on the frigid air. Still locked into the arabesque, It stuck out Its tongue and caught another flake.

Something squeaked.

It flopped Its head back onto Its shoulders, looking at the truck upside-down.

Another squeak, louder, almost a squeal.

It dropped Its leg, folded into a backbend, kicked Its legs over Its head, folded again, advancing toward the truck in a series of handstands. It thrust Its face through the open window. "Whatcha got there, Georgie?"

Georgie was holding a tiny calico kitten by the back of its neck. Its eyes were barely open, ears still droopy. The kitten struggled futilely, letting out a high-pitched cry of discomfort. Georgie did not let go. In fact, he held on a little tighter.

"Now where'd you *find* that?"

"Under the seat." Instead of softness in Georgie's face, there was something intense and focused. The kitten wailed. The snow fell faster, catching in Its eyelashes and hair, dusting the shoulders of Its leather jacket, settling on Its bare hands where it remained unmelting.

Robert lifted Its head and sniffed, then turned. An adult cat, also calico, teats dangling, paused mid-step in her creep around the corner of the office. She flattened her ears at It, and when It continued to watch her, she hissed. It hissed back, a windy and raspy sound that dwarfed her pathetic attempt at intimidation. She lowered her belly to the snow, not willing to abandon her offspring but too fearful to come any closer.

Robert returned Its attention to Georgie. "Are there others?"

"No."

It went statue-still. Let Georgie decide what to do with the kitten.

There was no wind to speak of, no cars passing on the road. The lot had gone still and dim and silent, except for the kitten.

The kitten writhed and cried, making slow, clumsy swipes at the air with its paws. Twice it managed to catch Georgie's skin with its claws. Georgie didn't seem to care. He scowled at the kitten for ten seconds, fifteen, then stuffed the kitten back under the seat. He crawled out of the truck and plopped to the ground next to Robert, brow still furrowed.

Robert patted Georgie's head through his double layer of wool caps. "Still got the grumblies, short stuff?"

"Yeah."

Robert narrowed Its eyes at the mother cat, who had inched a little closer, bristling tail held aloft. "These kitties sure look *well-fed*. I *wonder* who's been taking care of them..." It looked at the garage, then one eye dropped down to Georgie. "Come on." Taking Georgie's mittenend hand, It led him to the busted office window and promptly swung him inside.

"What are we doing?" Georgie asked, obediently following It to the door through to the garage.

"Sometimes, Georgie, the best part is the anticipation."

Georgie could not have said how long they sat in that quiet garage. He had gotten quite good at sitting and staring and just sort of zoning out, losing complete track of time, thinking and feeling nothing. He wondered if that was how adults sat through church services and meetings.

Robert and the boy sat on one of the mattresses for nearly an hour, as still and silent as frozen corpses, the heavy snowfall outside shielding them from the sounds of Derry as surely as if they were on another continent, another planet. When the office door creaked open and the husband and wife (recently homeless, left destitute by an ill child

that drained their savings with her medical bills and still died before reaching ten) entered the garage, It pounced on them without preamble. It plunged black, shiny, hard-shelled limbs through both of their hearts before they could let out screams of alarm. Georgie's only reaction was to lower his brows and look away.

The crab legs melted back into human hands, and Robert dragged the still-twitching bodies over to Georgie. It sank Its fingers into the wife's face and bumped Georgie's shoulder with Its elbow. "Arm or leg?"

Georgie considered the wife's corpse for a moment. "Arm."

Outside, the mother cat was busy digging a new den for her sole kitten under a stack of old tires. Even with the thickly falling snow as a buffer, her sensitive ears could pick up the sounds of breaking bones, tearing flesh, ripping clothing, and low growls. She did not dare to look under the garage door at the boy and the strange man eating together side by side.

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A/N: Yeah that got quite grim. That's where all the fun is, though.